



CHANGE FOOD PRESENTS:

# HOW TO START A COMMUNITY FRIDGE

A step-by-step guide

BY DIANE HATZ, WITH ASSISTANCE FROM  
EAST VILLAGE NEIGHBORS  
AND S'MAC

The community fridge movement has taken off all across the United States - and beyond. Help feed neighbors and build community in your area with this detailed guide on launching a fridge



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## How To Start a Community Fridge

In April 2020, 10,000 cars lined up at an emergency food distribution event hosted by the San Antonio Food Bank. By mid-May, New York City estimated that 1 in 4 city residents were “food insecure” which is defined as not having reliable access to affordable, nutritious food.

Before COVID-19, approximately 35 million people in the United States were food insecure, including 11 million children. According to Feeding America, food insecurity was projected to increase to over 50 million people in the U.S., including 17 million children, by fall of 2020, less than a year later.

COVID-19 has increased the number of hungry people and also uncovered how widespread hunger and food insecurity were before the pandemic even started.

In the summer of 2020, the community fridge movement exploded in the U.S. Neighborhoods around the country plugged in refrigerators stocked with fresh food outside of bodegas, restaurants and stores. Many also include pantries for shelf stable food and personal care items.

The concept is simple and the movement’s motto sums it up - **Take what you need; leave what you can.** Neighbors drop off unopened, uneaten food they don’t want, and other neighbors take food that they need. Volunteers take care of the fridge - cleaning, sorting, arranging shelves - as well as picking up donations from local shops, bakeries and restaurants.

As the community fridge and pantry movement grows, more and more people are interested in starting one in their area. The following is a detailed guide on starting a fridge, based on my experience co-founding the East Village Neighbors Fridge in New York City.

I’m also **compiling a fridge cookbook, so drop me a line if you’d like a copy when it’s complete** and/or sign up to get notified when it’s released - <https://bit.ly/UpdatesCF>.

Eat well!

*Diane*

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# Starting a Community Fridge - Table of Contents

<b>Learn about Community Fridges</b>	<b>5</b>
What You'll Need	5
<b>Legal</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Partner with an Organization</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Build a Team</b>	<b>7</b>
How to Find Volunteers	8
Volunteer Duties	8
Training Volunteers	9
Team Leaders	9
<b>The Fridge</b>	<b>10</b>
Getting Started	10
Finding a Fridge	10
Add a Food Pantry	11
Stocking and Maintaining the Fridge	12
Expiration Dates	15
Items in High Demand	15
<b>Fundraising and Donations - Money and Food</b>	<b>15</b>
Monetary Donations	15
Keeping Track	16
Food Donations	16
Stores and Restaurants	16
Neighbors	17
Food hubs	17
Alternative Urban Foraging	18
Fundraising Ideas	18
<b>Social Media and Promotion</b>	<b>20</b>
What to Promote	20
Fliers	20
Social Media	21
<b>The Challenges</b>	<b>23</b>
Expiration Dates	23
People Taking Too Much Food	24

People Selling Food	24
Vandalism	25
<b>A Final Note</b>	<b>25</b>

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Many thanks to Edie Meyer of [East Village Neighbors](#) and Sarita and Caesar Ekya of [S'MAC](#) for all their help and hard work co-founding and maintaining the East Village Neighbors Fridge!

Follow us [@eastvillageneighbors](#)  
Donate to the fridge [bit.ly/EVNFunds](http://bit.ly/EVNFunds)

Donate to Change Food to help us create a community fridge cookbook - and more!  
<http://www.changefood.org/donate/>

To receive a copy of the cookbook and to stay in touch with Change Food and the EVN Fridge, join our mailing list -  
<https://bit.ly/UpdatesCF>



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## Learn about Community Fridges



Your first step is research, so read about community fridges around the U.S. There has been an explosion of them since September 2020, but the day-to-day reality of managing one is still being fine-tuned. You can find background information on fridges on Change Food's [community fridge](#) page.

You can also find more information on fridges at:

- [Eater](#)
- [New York Times](#)
- [Today](#)
- [The Village Sun](#)

A quick online search will bring up many more articles about the fridge movement.

There is a slack channel for any fridge - visit [communityfridges.slack.com](https://communityfridges.slack.com) to join a growing global network of fridges.

### What You'll Need

We found it best to have:

- **Phone number** - To respect team members' privacy we set up a [google voice](#) account. It's free, has voicemail, and you get a phone number that can be shared with and used by multiple volunteers. This is helpful if you expect a lot of phone calls and would like to have volunteers on various shifts answering the phone. Remember, not everyone relies on email and some people appreciate being able to speak with a actual person.
- **Email address** - We easily created a free gmail account that several team members monitor. It's advisable to get both a dedicated phone number and email for the fridge so they can be shared, and also because you'll be putting contact information on fliers and posting them around your area. We recommend using gmail because it's free, and you then have access to other Google products such as forms and spreadsheets.
- **WhatsApp group** - You don't have to use WhatsApp - Signal or general text messaging can work also - but we found WhatsApp to work best to communicate with volunteers and between admins. Set up a group for the admins/team leaders and another for volunteers. (with admins on there also). This way, you can easily connect with everyone when a shift needs to be filled, and volunteers can connect with each other to switch shifts and to share information about the fridge.
- **Instagram account** - It's very important to have an Instagram account if you want to raise your visibility among local businesses and with the fridge community around the world.

- **Private Facebook group** - Our Facebook group has been key to building a community around the fridge. See the social media section for details.
- **Donation site** - You need to set up a place where people can donate money. Details in the Donation section starting on page 15.
- **Tracking system** - We used Google forms and spreadsheets at first to recruit volunteers and keep track of donations but eventually moved to Airtable because of increased functionality. It can be a bit cumbersome, so you can keep track of everything through Google products if you don't want to get overly detailed. (We chose Google because their online forms are free and easy to create, and they automatically filter into spreadsheets, saving you a lot of time.)



## Legal

There has not been much mention about the legal side to hosting a fridge, but you should be aware of any local laws or regulations in your area that relate to having one. Health officials seem to be easing up on restrictions during the height of the pandemic and hunger crisis, however you are advised to make sure you are covered for possible liability or health code violations.

In the United States, a 1996 Federal bill called the [Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Food Donation Act](#) protects anyone donating food and grocery products to a nonprofit to distribute for free to people in need. Under this act, any donor is protected from civil or criminal liability if the food was donated “in good faith” (meaning a person was not trying to poison someone else).

What does this mean? You should partner with a nonprofit, find a fiscal sponsor, or get 501(c)3 status yourself. Read on.

## Partner with an Organization



You'll be covered for liability if you partner with a nonprofit instead of a regular business (like a local store), so this should be your first consideration. Alternatively, you might want to either get your own [501\(c\)3 status](#) or register with a fiscal sponsor, a legal entity you work through that holds the nonprofit status.

Fiscal sponsors are a great option - although they normally charge some type of administrative fee - up to 20% would not be uncommon; most are in the 9-15% range. [Open Collective](#) has offered to be a fiscal sponsor for community fridges, so please contact them for [more information](#) if you are interested. The East Village Neighbors Fridge is a project of [Change Food](#)®, which is fiscally sponsored by [Social Good Fund](#) - a fiscal sponsor whose mission is to positively develop and impact local communities.

## Build a Team

You cannot launch and effectively maintain a fridge on your own, so you must build a team. Your fridge will be most successful if you can find three or four other volunteers to co-manage it with you.. Then look for one or two more people to help manage duties after volunteers come on board. You will also need to recruit a large group of volunteers to be most successful.

Please note - there are generally three types of volunteers:

- Go-getters. These are your Admins and Team Leaders and will help organize and 'own' the fridge.
- Dedicated. These are volunteers who will commit to helping out several times a week and are reliable and responsive but not necessarily leaders.
- Occasional. This tends to be the bulk of volunteers. They'll help on occasion and cannot be relied upon to do a regular shift. Embrace these folks also - they might turn into more dedicated volunteers over time and everyone who knows about the fridge is a potential promoter of it.

## How to Find Volunteers

The East Village Neighbors Fridge uses Google - we use their forms for recruiting volunteers and spreadsheets to keep track of everything. Google is free - you can also use their calendar to schedule volunteers. We eventually moved to AirTable for scheduling and monitoring of both volunteers and food donations, though to use AirTable properly, you will have to pay a monthly fee that can get costly if you have multiple organizers using it. It's helpful if you can get a volunteer who's good with IT to help you figure out your volunteer management system.

Ways to find volunteers include:

- Create a volunteer application in Google forms. Share the url to the Google form so interested individuals can sign up - also share a link to your fundraising (more on that below).
- Even in our high tech world, a great way to find volunteers is to post fliers around the area. Create a flier that both asks for volunteers and promotes the fridge itself. Always include an email address, phone number and social media account - post anywhere people frequent (i.e. grocery stores, laundromats, coffee shops, gyms)
- Join local Facebook groups (such as your neighborhood's Buy Nothing group), and find local Instagram accounts for businesses and people in your area, and ask them to post a link to your volunteer form and donation page.
- Download the Next Door app and post out to your neighborhood.

## Volunteer Duties

- Post fliers around the area
- Ask local businesses to donate leftover food to the fridge
- Clean the fridge and keep tidy; Monitor food in the fridge and/or pantry
- Pick up recurring food donations from businesses, individually wrap, and put into fridge
- Assist any of the team leaders with their duties





## Training Volunteers

The best way to train a new volunteer is to have a current one meet them at the fridge and run through everything. What volunteers need to know:

- Always wear gloves when touching food
- Wear a mask as long as public health officials recommend doing so. We give masks to anyone who comes to the fridge without one, and we also tell anyone who isn't wearing it properly to put it on correctly before going into the fridge or pantry.
- It is of paramount importance that all volunteers are friendly to anyone coming to the fridge. They should say hello and even engage in conversation if the person wants to, and be willing to be at the fridge for a while. We are not just feeding people, we're building community and spreading a little kindness to a lot of people who are struggling. Many people are out of work and anxious - a few kind words can make their day. If a volunteer is not willing to do this, it's better to ask them to help with social media or a job that doesn't put them in front of other people. (We take it that seriously!)
- See "Stocking and Maintaining the Fridge" that starts on page 12 for best practices for putting food in and maintaining the fridge. Go through all of this with a new volunteer so they understand your procedures.
- Let your volunteers know if they should restock supplies such as paper towels and spray cleaner and if you will reimburse them. EVN will reimburse any volunteer that buys supplies via Venmo as long as they send a photo of the receipt. You need to decide how you will handle this, i.e., if volunteers can buy supplies or if Team Leaders need to handle this.

## Team Leaders

Team leaders have various duties - they can be split up among your team, or a couple leaders can take on multiple roles. Please note that these responsibilities can be time consuming. Duties include:

- Recruiting, training and managing volunteers
- Accounting, donations and financials
- Volunteer training
- Social media
- Graphics and design



## The Fridge

### Getting Started

The location of your fridge is very important. You ideally want it in a popular area with foot traffic, as well as near areas of hunger and high need. You need an electric outlet so outside a store or restaurant is ideal. Electric costs can run around \$150 a year. Make sure you have an agreement with the establishment you are getting the electricity from and decide in advance if you or the store will be paying the electric bills.



If you decide to put your fridge outside a restaurant or other business, make sure the owners are okay with the foot traffic and the different types of people that will show up, including homeless individuals. The East Village Neighbors Fridge has a constant flow of people putting food in and taking food out, and the owners of S'MAC, the restaurant where it is located, knew in advance that there would be a large number of people there every day. You might want to consider asking the business to be a co-founder.

The fridge and pantry should be under some type of covering or awning to protect it from the elements. Most fridges build their own protection. It's not possible for us to build a structure, so we put clear, heavy tarp over the top if the weather is going to be bad.

You will need a good quality extension cord suitable for appliances. Do not use more than one extension cord; plugging cords into cords is not safe.

### Finding a Fridge

When finding a fridge, look to see if you have a local Buy Nothing Facebook group. If you don't see a fridge after searching through the page, create a post with ISO at the beginning (In Search Of) and ask if anyone has a fridge they want to give away. If you can't find one for free, look on Craig's List, Facebook marketplace, the Next Door app, any local community Facebook group, or

other groups you can find. Please be careful on any of these sites, especially Craig's List, because of potential scammers.

You can use any type of fridge - one from an office or home, or a more industrial, restaurant-sized unit. Make sure to get measurements so you can confirm that the owners of the space where the fridge is located agree to the size.

Once you find a location, a fridge, and an extension cord, simply plug it in. Wait 24 hours for the coolant to kick in and for the appliance to work properly. It's a good idea to bolt the fridge to the ground, to avoid the chance of it being tipped over. The EVN fridge is bolted to a set of pallets that are fixed to the ground.

Nearly every fridge is decorated, so look for an artist, or a classroom of children local to the area who would be interested in painting the fridge. Search online for "community fridge images" to see how beautiful they are.

Please note: if you live in an area that gets extremely cold, you might need to unplug the fridge during the coldest spells.

## **Add a Food Pantry**

Many community fridges also have pantries for dry goods - canned food, rice, pasta, as well as personal care items such as toothbrushes and feminine care products - so try to find a space for both a fridge and some type of pantry/shelving. The pantry doors should close to keep out the elements and any four-legged guests. Glass doors are not recommended.



Look in your local Buy Nothing Facebook group or in the Next Door App for anyone giving away shelving units or cabinets. If you are in a city, go around your neighborhood the evening before trash pickup and especially at the end of the month (when people move out) - it can often result in quality furniture you can use. Alternatively, visit a Habitat for Humanity or similar store for low cost, affordable furniture. Or, better yet, build your own pantry from wood that would otherwise go to waste. Just make sure to weatherize the wood so your cabinet will survive in various types of weather.

The pantry should be appropriate for outdoor use, even if you have an awning overhead. Metal cabinets or properly treated wood works well. Doors that close tightly will help during rainstorms.

[Woodshop Diaries](#) has a guide on how to build a mini-pantry, or, if you have the space and determination, you could [build a shed](#) and install shelving.

## Stocking and Maintaining the Fridge

Maintaining your fridge properly takes a handful of very dedicated people and a lot of time, especially at the beginning. The East Village Neighbors Fridge has over 100 volunteers signed up - approximately 35 are active. You need enough people helping so that someone can check and clean the fridge at least twice a day.

As your fridge becomes well known, neighbors will begin to take ownership of it. You will find that locals will help keep it clean and tidy, but, in the beginning, you must make sure volunteers are there cleaning and checking it. Encourage people to take photos of what's in the fridge and post in your Facebook group and on Instagram.

Necessary fridge items:

- Masks and gloves for volunteers to use. Hand out masks to anyone not wearing one at the fridge if a volunteer happens to be there. Volunteers should always wear gloves when handling food at the fridge.
- Paper towels.
- Spray cleaner - we use Seventh Generation because it's nontoxic and kills germs.
- Plastic wrap for food donations. Any pastries or bread products need to be wrapped in clear wrap. (Paper bags lead to many people opening bags and rummaging around, so see-through wrapping is preferred.)
- Stickers - for donors and volunteers to label food.
- Sharpies/markers.
- Ziploc bags in case you get large quantity drop offs that you want to split up - like a 10 pound bag of rice that can be labeled and separated into many smaller bags.
- Knife if you get large loaves of bread that can be cut into smaller pieces.
- Optional: We put a kitchen-sized dry-erase board on the fridge for the volunteers to leave messages, to post inspiring quotes, and to let people know what is in the fridge.



- Optional: We put a magnetic plastic holder on the fridge to hold the stickers and sharpies, though the stickers got soaked when it rained. You could do the same or leave them in a Ziploc inside on the door of the fridge.

Ideally, the establishment hosting the fridge can offer you space to store items the volunteers will need. If you leave things in the fridge or pantry, they will be gone in a matter of hours. We found that metal bins we used to keep fruits and vegetables organized would even be taken - so anything put in the fridge will probably go, and go quickly. We now use large aluminum baking pans to keep items organized. They're inexpensive and easily replaced.

In time, neighbors will start to take ownership of the fridge and will check also, but, at least to start, you need to have volunteers who will diligently clean the shelves, throw away anything that is not appropriate, and make sure the food is grouped together (apples with apples, for example) and neatly placed on the shelves. Dignity, respect and community are at the root of our efforts with the

EVN Fridge - our volunteers understand that the fridge should look like something their grandmother would be proud of.



Each fridge allows or doesn't allow certain items, so it's for you to decide. To consider:

- Store-bought prepared food vs ingredients. We have a mix of people who use the fridge - some are homeless or in living situations without kitchens so need prepared food. Other guests have kitchens and prefer to make their own food, so we try to stock vegetables, fruits, pastas, butter and other dairy, oil and other ingredients to make food. We also include sandwiches, wraps, soups, and other prepared foods. Chat with people who use the fridge to get a feel for what is most in need.

- Meat. We allow packaged meat from stores as well as the city, and volunteers will put them in the freezer if they're dropped off in the fridge.

- Homemade food. Some fridges do not allow homemade food, though we do. We ask everyone to

label all food with date and ingredients. We have a flier explaining what we accept and how to label it on the fridge. You need to know your local health codes and decide what's best for your community.

- Processed food. We frown on processed food and sodas, but let them stay if some have been donated. We stress that we prefer fresh, healthy food.

- Even though it is not recommended to put bread in the fridge, we do. We individually wrap all pastries and bread in clear wrap and put in the fridge. It doesn't stay long enough to lose quality, and it's a way to ensure any rodents don't have a feast.

When checking the fridge:

- Check all food to make sure it's something you would feed to your family. We allow homemade food, but it must be labeled with the date made and ingredients. We did decide, though, that food we pick up from stores - especially bread and pastries - does not have to be dated because it goes so fast. You need to decide what's best in your area - if the food stays around for a day or two, putting the date on is recommended.
- NO partially eaten, leftover food is allowed. Every container must be checked. If someone has left half their burrito, you must dispose of it. Compost it if possible; throw it away if you can't.
- If there are unopened, unlabeled bags, open them. The EVN Fridge will often get drop offs that have come from school feeding programs or local pantries - we've found that most people only want one or two things from the bags, so we separate the items and place them neatly on the shelves. We put the bags in the pantry so guests using the fridge can reuse them.
- We suggest you put all bread products in the fridge. We know it's not best for the item, but you don't want rats or other four-legged guests to invade your pantry. Again, the food goes so fast that the bread or pastries won't have time to cool down.
- We allow well-cleaned takeout containers from restaurant take-out food to be dropped off in the pantry for people to use when making food for the fridge.
- We allow pet food in the pantry, but we have a specific shelf for it that is labeled. If you permit pet food, make sure anyone dropping off sealed Ziplocs have clearly labeled what it is, and make sure it has a specific place in the pantry so there is no confusion.
- We have found that plastic utensils from takeout go very quickly, so we allow wrapped plastic utensils - we leave some in the pantry and some in the butter or other shelf compartment on the inside door of the fridge.
- Make sure the fridge is organized and looks nice.



## **Expiration Dates**

We have had debates over expired or close-to-expired foods. Because there is no national law or requirement around expiration dates, and because they are very confusing, we are fine with close to or just-expired food. When checking dates, please note that “best by”, “use by” and “expired” have three different meanings and are basically arbitrary. “Best by” and “use by” are guidelines - the food should be fine after that date so use your best judgment. I eat expired food on occasion, and I’ve never gotten sick.

Expired is also a relative term and does not mean the food has gone bad. Again, use your judgment and train volunteers to do the same. Something that’s been expired for a couple days is most likely fine; something that expired a year ago, maybe not so good. Perhaps circle or point out expired food so people using the fridge can make their own decision.

## **Items in High Demand**

Demand will most likely differ in other areas, so make sure to speak with people who are using the fridge to find out what they need. What we found goes very quickly (well, everything does!), but items most requested are:

- Bananas
- Peanut butter
- Dairy - butter, cheese, etc
- Eggs
- Cooking oil
- Feminine care products
- Any fruit or vegetable, especially more expensive ‘specialty’ foods like broccoli and other greens

# **Fundraising and Donations - Money and Food**

## **Monetary Donations**

Set up a way for people to donate money before you start advertising your fridge. We found an outpouring of generosity with many people wanting to donate money. You need to decide what’s best for you and your community, but we found:

- If you can partner with a nonprofit or find a fiscal sponsor, I would suggest you run everything through them. They will take a percentage - up to 20% is not unheard of - fundraising sites will take a percentage also. By going through a nonprofit or a fiscal sponsor, donors can also take a tax deduction. In addition, they will most likely have a fundraising platform that you can use to raise money.

- If you would like to use a fiscal sponsor, [Open Collective](#) has offered to sponsor community fridge programs - you can go through their regular for profit arm or register through their [nonprofit foundation](#). Remember, working through a nonprofit fiscal sponsor will cover you for any liability with donating food.
- The best way we found to raise money was to get articles about us published in the local community blog - find a local newspaper, blog, online magazine, Facebook group, etc - ask them to share what you are doing and include a link to your fundraiser. You'll have the best results if you stick with local publications.
- GoFundMe is a nightmare. I highly recommend you use some other way to raise money.
- Venmo. Some people will ask if you have a Venmo account, and this is a viable way to collect money. Just know that you cannot link your google voice number to the account when setting it up, and if you already have a Venmo account it will not let you use your phone number twice. In addition, the money will go into your checking account or a designated account, and you need to be very careful and very transparent with how the donations are used. If you use a personal or any for-profit business Venmo account, donors cannot take a tax deduction.

You could set up a bank account for the fridge and connect a Venmo - we chose not to do that. Instead, after we realized we were potentially going to raise thousands of dollars, we partnered with my nonprofit Change Food so we could run everything through their accounting system. It is not advisable to run thousands of dollars through your personal bank account.

- PayPal is also another way to collect money.

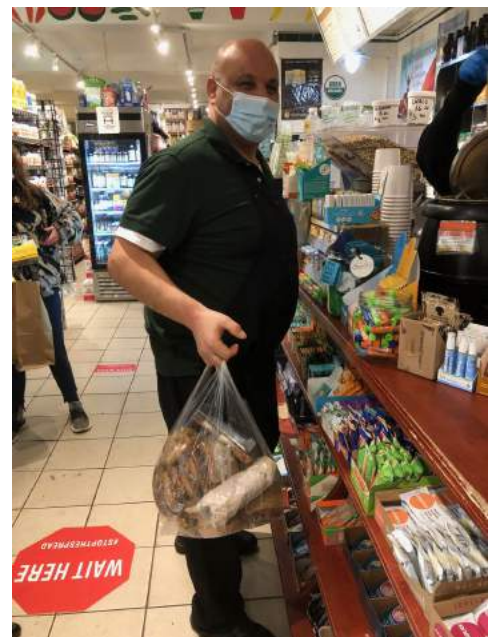
## Keeping Track

You must have someone keep track of the monetary donations coming in as well as the money being spent on food and the fridge. This person is a Team Leader and has some experience with accounting and/or bookkeeping. It can be done on a Google spreadsheet or through bookkeeping software like Quickbooks. Make sure to keep photos of receipts for any purchases together. Be transparent with all your donors and anyone who asks.

## Food Donations

### Stores and Restaurants

Contact local restaurants, bakeries, delis and any store that sells food. We found the best approach was to let them know where the fridge is and tell them that we were





spreading word about it. Because so many businesses are struggling right now, please do not guilt or pressure anyone into giving you anything. We found that bakeries are very generous and have our volunteers pick up leftovers at the end of their day.



We focus on food that would otherwise be thrown out. Let potential donors know the fridge is up and running and where it is. Also mention that it's open 24/7 (if that's the case) and that they are welcome to drop off anything that would otherwise get thrown out. Also mention you have volunteers who could pick up food to make it easier for them. But stress that there is no pressure and you're just spreading word.

Please be respectful of other people's situations, especially if you are going to a mom and pop, independent store - they are most likely the ones who will donate. We found the larger chains already donate leftovers to a large food recovery program - it's City Harvest in NYC - so you might not get very far with them, though it's worth asking.

If the store has a bulletin board or somewhere you could post a flier for the community, please ask that they do.

## **Neighbors**

It might take a little time, but encourage your community to drop off food at the fridge. Because of the huge demand, we ask people to drop off any time, day or night. Some of our volunteers now make food for the fridge - soups, stews, pastas - and another volunteer will pick up and deliver. (This is assuming you allow homemade food.)

Also promote the fridge to your community and suggest they drop off food items any time. Some individuals do a full shop for food; others pick up an extra item or two when they're at the grocery store and will drop the item(s) off. It might take a month or two, but as word gets out, more and more people in your community will randomly drop off food.

## **Food hubs**

I'm not sure about other parts of the country, so you need to research and ask other fridges in your area, but in New York City, there are several food hubs that have been established for fridges. Our Food NYC is definitely the best. Operating through Slack, they've been able to bring together all the fridges in the area to help share food and get food to the fridges. If you are in an area with a

lot of fridges and do not have a hub connecting all the fridges, please consider doing so. Contact Our Food NYC for more info - <http://ourfood.nyc/>

Another great group in NYC is EV Loves NYC, a group of volunteers who get together weekly to cook food for community fridges. If you are in the NYC area, connect with them to see if you could get some of their food. If you live outside of NYC, consider finding people to start a similar group. <https://www.evloves.nyc/>

Also try contacting food pantries and CSAs in your area to see if they ever have left over food boxes. Through Our Food NYC, we're able to pick up food from a pantry distribution center to take to our fridge - the challenge is finding volunteers with cars, but when we can, we can get a lot of food for the neighborhood.

### Alternative Urban Foraging

Another option is dumpster diving. It's simply taking otherwise good items from the trash. Even though that might sound unappealing when it comes to food, individuals who collect food items make sure it has not touched other trash and that it's secure in its own bag, so it is clean and edible.



Technically, dumpster diving is legal, but you have to [check any city, state or county ordinances](#) involving garbage. Also, going into any trash placed on private property can be considered trespassing.

I can't recommend you take this on as a way to find food for your fridge, though, as an example, two women in New York City, who remain anonymous, rescue food that is perfectly good to eat and has been thrown out and put it in fridges around the city. They generally leave protein bars and other well-packaged food. The decision is yours. A better option is to convince the store to give you the food before it's put into the trash.

### Fundraising Ideas

Be creative with your fundraising. You're raising money to buy food and cover costs such as electricity and equipment. Electricity per year will run around \$150, and the cost of a fridge can run from free to several hundred dollars on somewhere like Craigslist.

If you find you're raising quite a bit of money, also consider paying someone to help maintain the fridge, especially someone who lost their job during the pandemic and who is not getting

unemployment. This would be best done through a fiscal sponsor because you need to know the law around hiring people. Suggestions on how to fundraise:

- Put your fundraising url on everything you do, in your signature line in your email, everywhere you can think. Have your volunteers do the same.
- Create a [Facebook fundraiser](#) - encourage your volunteers to help share and support.
- A win win is to get local restaurants to create a “Donate a Meal” program. [S'MAC](#), one of the co-founders of the EVN fridge, has set up their website so that it enables users to donate a meal to the fridge. The customer buys a meal that S'MAC makes, and it's put into the fridge for a neighbor to take. It helps a neighbor as well as the restaurant.
- Promote your fundraiser on all your personal social media.
- Find out if any companies in your area might be either interested in donating or if they have an internal communication system where they can encourage employees to donate. Banks, stores, etc - just please keep in mind that many businesses are struggling financially, so do not pressure the people you speak with in any way.
- Try to get local media to write articles about your fridge and include a link to your fundraiser.



Don't forget to send a thank you note to every person who donates, no matter how big or small the donation.

## Social Media and Promotion

If you want to build community and spread word about the fridge, you must have some social media accounts - Instagram and Facebook at a minimum.

### What to Promote

Some suggestions on what you can put on social media and get local media to write about:

- Food in the fridge - we have someone posting in our Facebook group nearly every day about how full or empty the fridge is - with photos.
  - Volunteers will take photos of the stores who are donating food to post on Instagram. Give all the people and stores donating a shoutout and tag them in your post if possible. It's a way to say thank you to the establishments who are giving you food.
  - Volunteer of the week or month - it's a way to help your community get to know each other.
  - You can share stories from people who use the fridge, but make sure you have their permission and you're transparent about how you'll use any information they share.
- Fridges are based around anonymity, so please do not infringe on anyone's right to privacy.



### Fliers

Do not rely on social media alone - many people are not online searching and visiting social media sites, and there are those who still do not have regular access to the Internet. We found fliers to be the most effective means of communication as we started our fridge.

Make sure you know what languages are spoken in your area and make fliers in as many as you can. Please don't rely on Google translate or any online translations - try to find a native speaker in your area, so the fliers reflect what you are trying to say.

We made two types of fliers - one for donations (cash and goods) and one to both find volunteers and promote the fridge. Do what's best for your area - just make sure to include the email address, phone number and url to your fundraising site.

When you're going to stores and asking for donations, leave a flier behind whether or not the establishment can help. Ask them to pass on the information to customers or anyone they think

could be helped. Do not try to force or guilt anyone to donate - just share the information and ask them to join you in the effort.

## Social Media

Promote the fridge to your local area through social media. We recommend you start an Instagram account as well as a private Facebook group for the neighborhood. A huge number of fridges have Instagram accounts, so we highly encourage you to create an account - make sure to search “fridges” and connect with as many as you can. It’s a vibrant network of people all over the world sharing advice and helping each other however they can.

- **Private Facebook Group.** Our Facebook group is for the community, not just volunteers. It’s also for pandemic-related info, local news and fridge specific topics. It’s become a resource for people in the community - neighbors are helping others find vaccine appointments, are giving recommendations on local vendors, etc. We encourage this because it helps build community.
  - There are bots and hackers that will automatically try to join your group, so we ask questions for people to gain membership - we ask where they live and if they’ll abide by our rules (search online for Facebook group rules to get examples of what to put in yours). The bots are getting better and putting words in as answers (ours are saying ‘hello!’) so best practice is to manually approve everyone.
  - We do not approve people outside the East Village unless they work there or have a good reason to join - and they tell us (e.g., they want to start their own fridge, they have an elderly relative in the neighborhood, etc).
  - We do not allow political posts or sales pitches so as not to stray from our focus on helping provide food and aid to neighbors. We created threads for specific areas such as these - subjects that we felt were important but might stray from our focus if we didn’t channel them into one thread. For example, we have a post about buying/selling/donating items so anyone who wants to sell or give away something, they post in that thread. Businesses



selling food, products or services also have their own thread; political posts go in one thread. You must decide what you will allow or not allow in your group.

- Be okay with banning anyone from your group if they violate community rules -



decide if you will give them a warning or two or ban outright. We usually put them on admin approval so their posts have to be approved and also get in touch with them to let them know what the problem is. If they do not abide by the rules, we will remove them from the group. Though that might sound harsh, one or two people can greatly impact your community building and group cohesiveness.

- **Instagram.** If possible, create an Instagram account for your fridge - it can also include community posts if you'd like.

- Having "Fridge" as part of your title will help other fridges find you but it's not mandatory. I would recommend it if you are going to focus mainly on the fridge and not other types of content. Our account is @eastvillageneighbors because we don't just post about the fridge (and created the account before we decided to start a fridge).

- Use #communityfridge as one of your hashtags - other fridges around the world will find you that way. We suggest you specifically look for other

fridges in your area or state, so you can support each other and share best practices.

- **Twitter.** You can easily add Twitter because it links with Instagram, but it's not essential.

SnapChat, TikTok, LinkedIn, Pinterest - they all take time, so use them if you think it will benefit your fridge. Just make sure you're consistent with your posts.

## The Challenges

Yes, there will be problems, and there will be challenges you need to figure out. A couple we faced include:

### Expiration Dates

Some people take issue with putting expired food in the fridge. I'm a healthy food advocate and will eat expired food that hasn't been sitting around for years. Your team needs to decide how you'd like to handle this. Just note that "best by", "use by" and "expired" dates do not mean the same thing, and because there is no standard rule on expired food, they are all basically meaningless. Any processed food (crackers, for instance) should be fine a few weeks after the expiration date. When it comes to meat, I would be a little more stringent.

One way we resolved this was to encourage donors to circle the expiration date and let the person picking up the food decide if they'd like to eat it. And if a donor comments that it's disrespectful, you could let them know that you're also working on minimizing food waste and that you feel the person taking the food can decide.



## People Taking Too Much Food

At the start of our fridge, I would get concerned that some people were taking too much food. Other fridge supporters also made similar comments. It was becoming quite heated, so we had a long discussion to decide our fridge policy. You might want to do the same before you start stocking the fridge - this issue might come up.

We decided that once a gift is given - i.e., once someone drops food off at the fridge - what happens with that gift is no longer under the control of the donor. It is a gift that has been given away. We also realized that we did not know why people were taking so much. We asked a few people - some stocked up for the week and others were picking up for neighbors. We also think some take a lot of food because they're worried they're going to starve. That's a legitimate fear, and we have nothing but compassion for anyone who's anxious about their future, so we decided we had no right to control how much a person took from the fridge. Additionally, we are simply not able to "police" the fridge. As a mutual aid project, this is about reciprocity and mutual benefit, and we believe it's best to always assume the positive.

## People Selling Food



A few neighbors began claiming that some people were stealing food from the fridge and selling it on the street, though we were never able to confirm it (even though there were people selling food given out from a nearby food pantry). We discussed the issue at length and decided it was out of our control. We don't know why someone would do such a thing - maybe they need money for medication, or a child's medication. We don't know - and it's not for us to know - we can only wish the person well and assume good intentions.

If an issue like this does come up, and one or two people are posting or speaking publicly about it, you must make a public statement (like a post in your Facebook group) to let everyone know your team's principles. This happened twice with East Village Neighbors, and the tone of the whole group was starting to sour, and the few who felt something bad was happening were starting to convince others that there were serious problems - so I made a

point to post publicly about our beliefs on these issues. It stopped the negativity and turned the tide - posts after that were people celebrating what was being left for others to take. Don't



underestimate the power of negativity - turn it around and be positive as soon as you notice a trend. We want people to feel good about helping others.

## **Vandalism**

Yes, there has been vandalism. Our first fridge lasted one night before someone knocked it over and broke it in the early hours of the morning. Rather than get upset, we realized it was asking to be knocked over because it wasn't secured, so we bolted a new one on a platform that was then secured to the ground, and we were back running in a matter of days. In another part of NYC, the entire fridge got stolen.

There are a lot of stressed people right now, so please try to wish any vandals well and just carry on. Alert your community and neighbors - and try to get local press to mention it - and ask people to donate toward another fridge. An NYC group that had their fridge stolen ended up with thousands of dollars in donations which was enough money to buy another fridge plus buy food for it.

Stuff will happen - do not let it stop you. The East Village Neighbors Fridge has helped develop a very strong East Village community, and we estimate we're feeding upwards of 2,000 people a week. Through the fridge, people and businesses are looking out for each other - and isn't that what we all want our community to be like?



## **A Final Note**

A community fridge is about more than feeding people - it's also about building a strong community. I've had the honor and pleasure to meet neighbors, local business owners and leaders, local government, as well as elderly and homeless in the area. I actually met more people in the six months I ran the fridge in NYC than I had living there for 25 years.

I look at this effort as a way to not only help people who need to be fed, but also to help volunteers connect. Many people feel isolated - and a community fridge is a way to bring people together. Find ways to introduce volunteers to each other - and remind them to be open to having friendly conversations when they're at the fridge.

**The fridge doesn't just feed the body - it also feeds the soul.**



So, please keep building community and helping your neighbors. This should be at the forefront of all that you do. In a world that seems divided, these fridges are bringing people from all walks of life, who never would have met each other, together for a common cause.

Good luck with your efforts - and please be in touch if you have any questions, comments, or suggestions on how to make this guide any better for future fridge founders.

Let us know when your fridge is up and running so we can celebrate with you and give you a shoutout!

From our East Village neighborhood to yours -  
**Thank you for caring!**

Be well - Diane & the EVN Team

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