

# Podcast Transcript

## Unpacking the Donated Food Distributing Organization Program

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[INTRO MUSIC PLAYS, Going Somewhere by Aves]

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Jae Williams (host): Welcome to Bridging the Gap, a podcast that brings us closer to understanding how environmental public health shows up in our everyday lives. I'm your host, Jae Williams.

When you think about food safety, your mind may automatically go to restaurants or grocery stores where food is prepared. But have you ever thought about places where food is available to the community at no cost, like shelters and food banks? These organizations also have to uphold certain standards in the interest of overall health. However, that process can look a little different. Today, as part of our three-episode series about food safety, we are talking with the people who know this area best. What steps are being taken to build community trust, correct misconceptions, and protect public health? Our guests are here to bridge the gap.

[MUSIC CONTINUES THEN FADES]

Jae: Welcome to the show. I'm really glad to have you both here, and to get started, let's do some quick introductions and meet you both.

Thu Bui (guest): My name is Thu Bui and I work in the Donated Food Distributing Organization or DFDO is what we call it for short. And I'm a Lead in the program and I've been in this role for about 3 years. It's a fairly new program that started in 2022.

Amanda Steyer (guest): Hi, my name is Amanda Steyer. I work as a Health and Environmental Investigator with Thu Bui on the Donated Food Distributing Organization program. I have been doing this job for almost three years now, and I do a lot of the field work and site visits for the program.

Jae: Good to meet you both again, and glad to have you here.

The work you do is housed within the Food Protection Program. Is that correct?

Amanda: Yes, that's correct.

Jae: Will you give us an overview of the Food Protection Program here at Public Health Seattle and King County?

Amanda: Sure, it's a department within Environmental Health Services here in King County. We have several health and environmental investigators. We go out to restaurants and just make sure that they are handling food safely, that they're meeting code requirements, and providing education and possible enforcement if necessary.

Thu: We're that group that checks the restaurants, and depending how they do on their

inspections, we post the emoji placards at the restaurant. We fall within that food protection program, but with the DFDO, it's specifically supporting nonprofits or any organizations that provide food for free to the community.

Jae: That's good to know, I feel like people listening will be able to understand that relationship; restaurants get inspected here in Seattle and King County, they end up with their own qualification emoji, you know, excellent, good. OK. And then that gives the customer some information.

We know from what you've already shared in previous discussions that you work with donated food distributing organizations, DFDOs or "diff does" for short, which I think is pretty fun to say. What are some of the key things that make an organization a DFDO?

Thu: So, there's a couple of requirements. What we look for is are they serving food for free to the community? Are they providing that food assistance? That's the first thing we look for. And then they should be a nonprofit organization where they can usually show us proof by showing a 501c IRS determination letter. We really want to be able to support the groups that are nonprofit. Those are the two main things that we look for.

Jae: So, some of those organizations would be like shelters, food banks...

Thu: Yeah, so you named some; food banks, food pantries, community centers. Sometimes they'll have meals there also. And congregate senior meal, that's another big part there where it happens throughout the year at different organizations will do that. But it's a way to invite our senior groups to come together and socialize and get a good healthy meal. But also, there's other social services involved there. So, you know, we want to take care of our senior community as well.

Jae: It sounds like some a lot of these organizations are meeting multiple needs. I mean, you mentioned having at least one healthy meal a day, but then also having that social interaction, especially for senior members of the community, which is super important.

Amanda: This summer I'm actually doing the Summer Meals Program so that's free meals for kids during the summer, so they have at least one meal a day. So, that's kind of what I'm focusing on this summer.

Thu: The other thing I find very interesting is throughout King County, there are many different cultural ethnic groups that will hold senior meals within that community. Some of them may not speak English so they can speak their own their own natural language. And so, wherever we go throughout King County, we'll get groups from Africa, Asian groups and the activities they do to get many of these senior citizens active, it's been very fun. Last time we went somewhere down south and they were playing pickleball and they had a pickleball tournament. It was very cool to see.

Jae: Oh, wow. Well, pickleball is very, very popular right now.

Amanda: They have like a regulation, like, pickleball court; it was just really fun to watch them. But also, we see a lot of dancing. Most of the senior meals that I've gone to, they dance beforehand and then they'll have like an art activity at the end. So, they're really trying to like give them a lot of different things, get them active, but then also, you know, doing art and communicating with their

peers. It's really cool.

Jae: That is wonderful. I'm glad that the organizations of King County are not only prioritizing these basic needs, but also making them culturally competent and, it sounds like, also fun.

I am also curious to know what led to the creation of this program and both of your roles.

Thu: There was always been a need for support and services designated to non-profit organizations that provide food for free. So, they really just need to notify the health department of their activities. They are exempt from having to purchase an annual permit, like a regular food restaurant. So, they just need to notify us and let us know about their food service activities. With the funding that we got with the Foundational of Public Health Services, when that came available, we knew that this is what we wanted to prioritize.

The program started in 2022 and it was able to fund my position and Amanda's position. So, we're solely dedicated to the DFDO program and providing support and services to many of these organizations that, you know, really help our community thrive.

That's how it started. We're still building up the program and expanding our services and just letting other organizations know that we're out there to provide that support for them.

Jae: Well, it definitely sounds like the funding from Foundational Public Health Services was able to facilitate the creation of these dedicated roles to do this work specifically, which is meeting a larger need.

In your work, are there any common misconceptions that you regularly encounter. And if so, how do you combat them?

Amanda; So, I can start by answering that and Thu, you can jump in if you'd like. One really common misconception is that when we show up to a facility, they think that we're there to shut them down. A lot of times, we have to tell them who we are, why we're there and just kind of assure them that we're there to kind of provide education and just ensure that food is being served or donated safely.

Thu: One of the thing with our program is really building trust with our community that we serve. I think, in the past, organizations that provide food for free, they had to get a permit. This is a long time ago, but that mentality is still there. So, we're really, beside providing equitable services to these community, but also building up a good working relationship, more of a collaborative relationship and changing that mistrust in us or in government. So, that's one misconception that we have that we're really trying to work on to improve.

But the other misconception is people think that donated food is not safe, which is not true. That's why our program is here is we want to make sure that any donated food distributed or being donated, that they are safe. And that's why they have to follow food safety requirements, just like food that's paid by a food establishment.

Jae: Can either of you think of a time in particular where you've had to work to change the dynamic between yourself and a DFDO?

Amanda: Yeah, I can think of one time in particular. We received a complaint from someone in the community regarding a drive through food bank. We receive complaints, we have to respond. So, when we arrived at this drive through food bank, the person in charge was almost immediately irritated to see us, almost like they knew who we were, was kind of abrasive. But we were able to just calmly approach them, explain who we are, why we're there. Really essentially, we're both on the same team, we want people to receive wholesome food. And just kind of approaching it in that way, it kind of softened him a little bit and I was able to revisit that facility later in the year, and it was a night and day experience. He was much more open to me being there, more open to answering questions, and it was overall a positive experience.

Jae: That had to be a good feeling, because I imagine that a lot of these organizations communicate with each other. And so, having positive interactions with this program is kind of like a positive feedback loop.

Thu: Yes, yes.

Amanda: Most definitely.

Thu: This facility, when we went there, we actually learned about it from a complaint from neighbors. And as soon as we approach and we notified who we were, I mean the person in charge just had a totally change of reaction. Sometimes, when we approach facilities like that, the first thing we tell them is that we're not here to shut you down. And so, once we say that they kind of calm down a little bit. I think that's the biggest challenge of our program is creating that partnership, having these operators feel at ease that we really want to be able to help them in providing safe food to their community.

Jae: Thu, you also mentioned how you find out about DFDOs varies. And so, I'm wondering, over the past few years, have you noticed any changes in that pattern?

Thu: Sometimes organizations want to help the community, but they're afraid that they may get shut down, or they might not be complying and so they may not want to come forward. And so, we understand that. We just worked slowly one-by-one with one organization and building our reputation and trying to build up that trust within the community. So, there's a few coalitions that we work closely with to help us build that trust culture.

When I talk to an organization, I really want to know about what they do, get a better understanding of what their goals are, what kind of food they want to serve, who's their clients; you know, everything about their activities and who they are. And then, also to make them feel that, you know, we're there to help them and not to close down their services or anything like that. Most of them are pretty open about what they do. That initial conversation with the organization is really important to let them understand that we're just there to help you. Hopefully they'll feel comfortable and trust me a little bit enough that they'll kind of release more information about what they do.

You know, I go to coalition meetings, a lot of community engagement meetings, just to let them know that we're out there and that we really want to just support them. One organization might come forward to say, "Hey, this is who I am. We've been doing this for, you know, 20 years. We've

never had this before or we didn't know that we had to do this.” And so, you know, we try to be very compassionate about it and just understanding like, OK, well, it's OK. Tell me about what you're doing and move forward. If there's some concerns then we'll talk about some of those food safety concerns at your facility.

Jae: It sounds like there's a great deal of community engagement that happens when identifying and connecting with DFDOs, which is really good to hear.

Thu: Then I have them fill out the form, which is the Donated Food Distributing Organization form, just to learn more about who they are and what kind of food service activities that they're doing. Once that gets done, I will schedule a site visit with Amanda and she'll go out there and then she'll take a look at the facility. And she'll look at the menu and what they want to do compared to what facilities they have at their kitchen. If they're going to prepare large volumes of food, it needs to be done in a space that's adequate. And then if it looks good, then we sign it off and then they get a permit number.

Jae: I've heard you mention a couple of times compliance and making sure that a kitchen is a permissible kitchen and making sure they have the right equipment to serve the food that they want to serve. So, what does that look like? What kind of equipment are you looking for?

Thu: Sure. One of the things, we don't want people to make food at their private home. So, we want people to prepare their food that is to be donated in a permissible kitchen. So, a permissible kitchen has a designated hand sink, only for hand washing. Gotta have warm water, at least 100°F with soap and paper towels; those are things you have to have to properly wash your hands. We look for a three-compartment sink, which is a way to properly wash your dishware and other kitchen equipment, as well as a food preparation sink that's designated for food only. And then adequate refrigeration space to hold your items, adequate space for the large volume of food that may be prepared

Jae: So, it sounds like there are three different sinks; there's one for hand washing, there's one for dish and equipment washing, which is our three-compartment sink; and then there's a food preparation sink where you would be like washing or handling food. Does that sound right?

Thu: That is correct. And so, sometimes facilities may not have all those. And so, that's where Amanda and I, we come in, we help them look at what are your options. If you don't have a food prep sink, for example, then what are your options? We look at what would be what would work for that organization. So, if they don't have a food prep sink, then we would say instead of bringing produce that needs to be washed, why don't we get produce that are pre-washed? So, that's an option that we talk about. It just really depends on what the organization has and that's where we come in and we really want to work with them to provide them options that work for their organization.

Jae: It sounds like we're kind of circling back to an overarching theme of meeting people and organizations where they are, which I think can be really empowering.

Thu: And then we talk about, you know, what are your barriers? Because we want to look at those barriers and understand what you're going through. And we understand that they're limited in their funds. And that's part of the Foundational Public Health funding that it's helped fund our time

designated to many of these non-profit organizations. And also, it exempts them from having to get a permit. So, they've been able to divert the money that they've had to pay for a permit to other things that they could focus on regarding their funding.

Jae: That's good to hear as well. I feel like that probably puts people's mind at ease and also helps them know that this is a more of a partnership between at the DFDO and you.

Thu, when we spoke previously, you mentioned that there are a couple of different ways to donate food safely, which I think will be of interest to our audience, because everybody wants to help and everybody needs a little extra help these days.

So, I remember that the three ways were as a member of the general public, as someone who owns a restaurant or runs a restaurant or maybe a catering business, and then maybe if you're already doing the work of a DFDO, becoming a DFDO. So, I'd love to go through those three things, starting with how can general members of the public donate food safely?

Thu: Yeah, good question. So, we get these questions a lot. So, depending on who you are, if you're a member of the public and you want to help your community, there's many different ways to do it. One way is to donate money to the organization. But, if you want to donate food, one way to do it is to donate shelf stable items such as dry pasta, dry rice. You can donate granola bars, chips; you know, these items that don't require refrigeration.

You can also bake cookies or brownies at home and you can donate those as well, which is not many people know, but that is allowed as long as these items don't have custardy stuff. So, that's one way if you're a member of the public to be able to do that.

Jae: I didn't know about the brownies or the cookies. That's very cool. But I do remember the shelf stable piece. I feel like, in the winter time, we see food donation bins in various parts of the community and they're always saying like dry goods, shelf stable because you don't want to risk putting something in the bin and having it go bad, you want to make sure it reaches somebody.

So then, what about if you are connected to a restaurant or a catering business, how would you go about donating food?

Thu: So, if you're a restaurant or caterer or an approved food establishment that's licensed with King County, if you have excess food or a surplus of food that are high risk, or non-high risk. When we say high risk, meaning food that requires refrigeration like chicken, lasagna; if you have excess of that those types of food, you can donate that to another DFDO organization. Just make sure that the food hasn't been previously served, and that it has been under proper temperature control and properly handled, then you can donate that. And a lot of times, when you donate to many of these DFDO organizations, they will ask those questions, because they want to make sure that the food that they're receiving is wholesome and that it's safe before they can distribute that to their community that they serve.

Jae: OK, that's really good to know too; I feel like we definitely saw during the COVID pandemic restaurants and community were really banding together to support each other and I feel like that's something that could translate over in terms of donated food.

And then, earlier you also mentioned that several different types of organizations that can qualify

as DFDOs; maybe they're prepping meals for seniors or for youth programs, food banks. What if there's a group that feels like they're already doing that work? Maybe they hear something like this and they decide that they want to become a DFDO; what would the steps be for that?

Thu: Yeah; if you want to start up a Donated Food Distributing Organization, what you want to do is be able to contact me, we'll have a conversation about what are your plans? What do you want to do? Where will you provide this service? Will you be preparing the meals? Where will you get your food? So, these are questions that I will ask the organization about what they want to do.

And then, from there, we look at what options are available for this organization. Really want to make sure that whoever's coming forward to wanting to start this feel comfortable in really talking about what they want to do and the community they serve. And then, from there, then I connect them with Amanda, and Amanda will talk to them and schedule a visit to come out to take a look at their facility.

Jae: I do want to know what is one main takeaway that you would want the audience to have after listening to this conversation?

Amanda: The main thing is that we are wanting to form good working relationships with the Donated Food Organizations in King County. You know, we're not here to shut you down, we're all on the same team, like we want to provide wholesome safe food to people that need it, and we want to reduce food waste as well. We're really just trying to work with you guys and provide education as needed.

Thu: You know, we want you to be able to feed your community, but we also want you to be able to do it safely. Another thing I wanted to add in to that takeaway is that, you know, even though the food is donated or given out for free, the food must all follow food safety requirements as described in the food code.

Jae: Right, because everybody deserves to have safe food.

Thu: Exactly.

Jae: Also for people listening who want to learn more or maybe they've heard something that's sparked their interest and they want to understand more or get involved with donating food in some capacity; what are some of the next steps that they should take?

Thu: Yeah, thank you; if you are a member of the public and you're wanting to donate, and you're not sure how to do it, you can contact me. If you're an organization that's wanting to start a DFDO, or if you're an existing DFDO and you want to register with us, you can also contact me as well. And if you're a caterer or restaurant out there and you have excess food or surplus food that are still wholesome and you want to donate to organizations nearby you, you can also contact me as well at [DFDOinfo@kingcounty.gov](mailto:DFDOinfo@kingcounty.gov), which is [DFDOinfo@kingcounty.gov](mailto:DFDOinfo@kingcounty.gov).

Jae: Perfect. And we will definitely include that in the show notes as well as the link to the donated food page on the King County website.

Well, thank you both so much for joining me in this episode, I'm really glad to have listened to

both of you, and I feel like I've actually learned a lot. Thank you so much.

Thu: Yeah, thank you for having us here.

Amanda: Yeah, thank you very much.

Jae: Thank you also to our audience for tuning in and listening to this episode; hopefully we filled in some gaps for you too.

[MUSIC RESUMES FOR OUTRO, Going Somewhere by Aves]

[OUTRO]

Bridging the Gap is a project by the Environmental Health Services Division of Public Health, Seattle and King County. This episode was hosted by me, Jae Williams, and produced and edited by myself and Ben Lennon. Special thanks to Thu Bui and Amanda Steyer for sharing their everyday expertise. Thank you to Keith Seinfeld for lending invaluable insight and knowledge about creating a podcast. We would also like to thank Carina Elsenboss for her leadership and support throughout. This project is funded through Foundational Public Health Services from the Washington State Legislature. You can learn more about FPHS on the Department of Health website, which is linked in the show notes.

Thanks for listening.

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