



Food Waste in Healthcare

Trends and Strategies

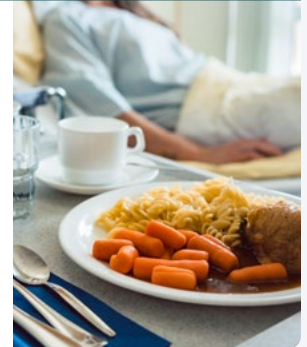
2026 Report



Key Takeaways

For the Hospital Sustainability Office

- This report provides the healthcare segment of the foodservice sector with its most robust benchmarking dataset to date, and data quality is expected to continue improving as Health Care Without Harm provides technical assistance to their members with support from the U.S. Food Waste Pact.
- The Unknown destination category, at 35.1%, represents the segment's most pressing data gap; closing it would move the segment closer to ReFED's 30%-or-less threshold for destination reporting and strengthen the credibility of healthcare's overall sustainability progress.



For Hospital Kitchen and Foodservice Staff

- Overproduction remains the leading cause of food waste in healthcare settings, accounting for 65% of the segment's total, making source reduction the most consequential intervention available to foodservice teams. Food waste audits are a critical first step toward identifying facility-specific hotspots and tailoring prevention efforts accordingly.
- The shift from cook-chill to room service has proven to be one of the segment's most effective waste-reduction levers, with facilities typically seeing plate waste fall from as high as 40% to 12–15%.
- Unfounded food safety concerns continue to contribute to unnecessary discarding; protections under the federal 1996 Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Food Donation Act shield donors from liability, and continuing staff education on date labeling and safe donation practices can help dispel these barriers.



For Food Recovery Organizations

- Healthcare facilities represent a receptive and growing partner base, having already achieved a donation rate of 16.3%, far above 2024's broader foodservice industry average of 0.86%.
- Food recovery organizations are encouraged to reach out to healthcare facilities in their communities and inquire about how they can support new or existing donation programs.
- Organizations may also find opportunities in hospitals' "food as medicine" initiatives, which can include donations of medically tailored meals, and should be aware that funding or resources for recovery partnerships may be available through a hospital's community benefit spending.



Introduction

As the only foodservice segment whose mission is to heal and protect public health and well-being, healthcare is well-positioned to lead in creating sustainable, equitable, and healthy communities. Tackling food waste presents a significant opportunity for climate action goals while redirecting nutritious surplus food. Hospitals can take measurable steps toward reducing food waste in their operations by implementing prevention strategies and can divert food from landfill through recovery and recycling strategies.

Preventing food waste at the source has clear benefits for hospitals' bottom lines and financial efficiency, with overproduction of food responsible for 65% of food waste in healthcare. According to a [2019 report from Champions 12.3](#), restaurants in a study saved about \$7 for every \$1 invested in food waste reduction by reducing food purchasing costs and increasing the value captured from food that would otherwise have been wasted.



This first-of-its-kind report between the U.S. Food Waste Pact (the Pact) and Health Care Without Harm represents a critical step for the healthcare segment of foodservice both measuring and publicly reporting on food waste. Using data from the 2025 [Practice Greenhealth Environmental Excellence Awards](#), this report provides insights into how the healthcare segment currently manages its surplus food,¹ with the goal of catalyzing action within hospital foodservice operations.

Cultivating Sustainable Change in Healthcare Foodservice

Food waste is a systemic problem, with ReFED estimating that [nearly one-third](#) of the U.S. food supply goes unsold or uneaten each year. Food that goes to waste has environmental, social, and financial impacts; the most recent estimates conclude that surplus food is valued at \$380 billion, or 1.3% of U.S. GDP. Additionally, this food is equivalent to nearly 114 billion meals that are not eaten and accounts for more than 3% of U.S. greenhouse gas emissions.

According to [Practice Greenhealth](#), the North American membership network of Health Care Without Harm, food waste accounts for 10% to 15% of the total waste generated by the average hospital. This translates to approximately [288,401 tons per year](#). As in other foodservice segments, much of the food wasted comes from overordering or overproduction, and hospitals are already focusing on food waste reduction as a landfill-diversion tactic. Additionally, a unique consideration for the healthcare segment is patient feeding. Plate waste can be significant among patients for a number of reasons, but the service model—mainly room service or cook-chill—plays a major role.

Fortunately, tackling food waste in healthcare can yield significant cost savings and can help the segment meet its goals related to the social determinants of health. While there is a critical opportunity to prevent food from being wasted upstream, donating safe, edible food from overproduction can complement hospitals' [food as medicine efforts](#) in vulnerable communities.

“We, as chefs, hold ourselves to a higher standard when it comes to healthcare,” Executive Chef Aaron R. Horton of Morrison Health at Providence says, noting that holding times (or the usable time after food is made) for ready-to-eat food prepared on-site in healthcare can be shorter than in other foodservice environments. “If you overproduce, you’ve got three days to figure out what to do with it, or you’ll have to throw it away. It’s a constant puzzle.”

Practice Greenhealth and the Power of Recognition

Practice Greenhealth is the leading membership organization for sustainable healthcare, delivering environmental resources and solutions to hospitals and health systems across the United States and Canada, including a healthcare emissions impact calculator, sustainable procurement guide, and sustainability benchmark reports. Each year, hundreds of Practice Greenhealth partners self-report quantitative and qualitative metrics against their sustainability goals and progress through the Environmental Excellence Awards, including food waste strategies, food waste destination data (donation, compost, etc.), and success stories.

The annual Environmental Excellence Awards program serves as the primary mechanism for tracking progress, allowing facilities to benchmark their performance against peers and earn recognition for their achievements. The awards use a rigorous data-reporting process to capture metrics across 11 impact areas, including food purchasing and waste management. This data is then used to generate annual benchmarking and metrics reporting, resources that serve as a roadmap for the entire segment. The efforts and recognition of participating organizations have shown the ripple effects of sustainability in healthcare, including increased operational resilience, efficiency, and patient care—all of which have the potential to lay the groundwork for improvements in community health and environmental stewardship.



At a Glance: 2025 Healthcare Food Waste

The healthcare foodservice segment is a high-volume environment where small percentage changes in efficiency have a substantial impact. A combination of quantitative and qualitative metrics shows that significant change is possible. The analysis in this report covers 347 facilities that reported to the Practice Greenhealth Environmental Excellence Awards. Note that only 210 of these facilities provided the required level of data for inclusion in the destinations and

impact analysis. Through Health Care Without Harm’s participation in the U.S. Food Waste Pact as a coalition signatory, the number of hospitals reporting data and the data quality itself are expected to improve in future years.

Based on data from the 2025 reporting cycle, the following figures provide a snapshot of how hospitals in the network are working to reduce food waste. In 2025, the following participation and performance markers were recorded across participating healthcare facilities:

Hospitals Committed to Reducing Food Waste: Key Metrics

TOTAL MEALS SERVED



ESTIMATED AT OVER

95M

across reporting facilities, including patient dining, cafeterias, and room service.

HOSPITALS COMMITTING



135

hospitals have indicated interest in supporting the Pact’s mission by participating in Practice Greenhealth’s Environmental Excellence Awards.

CONTRACTED FOODSERVICE COMPANIES



10

contracted foodservice companies participated in data collection.











* PACT SIGNATORIES

REPORTING FACILITIES



347

participating facilities across the U.S. shared their sustainability data through the Practice Greenhealth platform throughout the year.



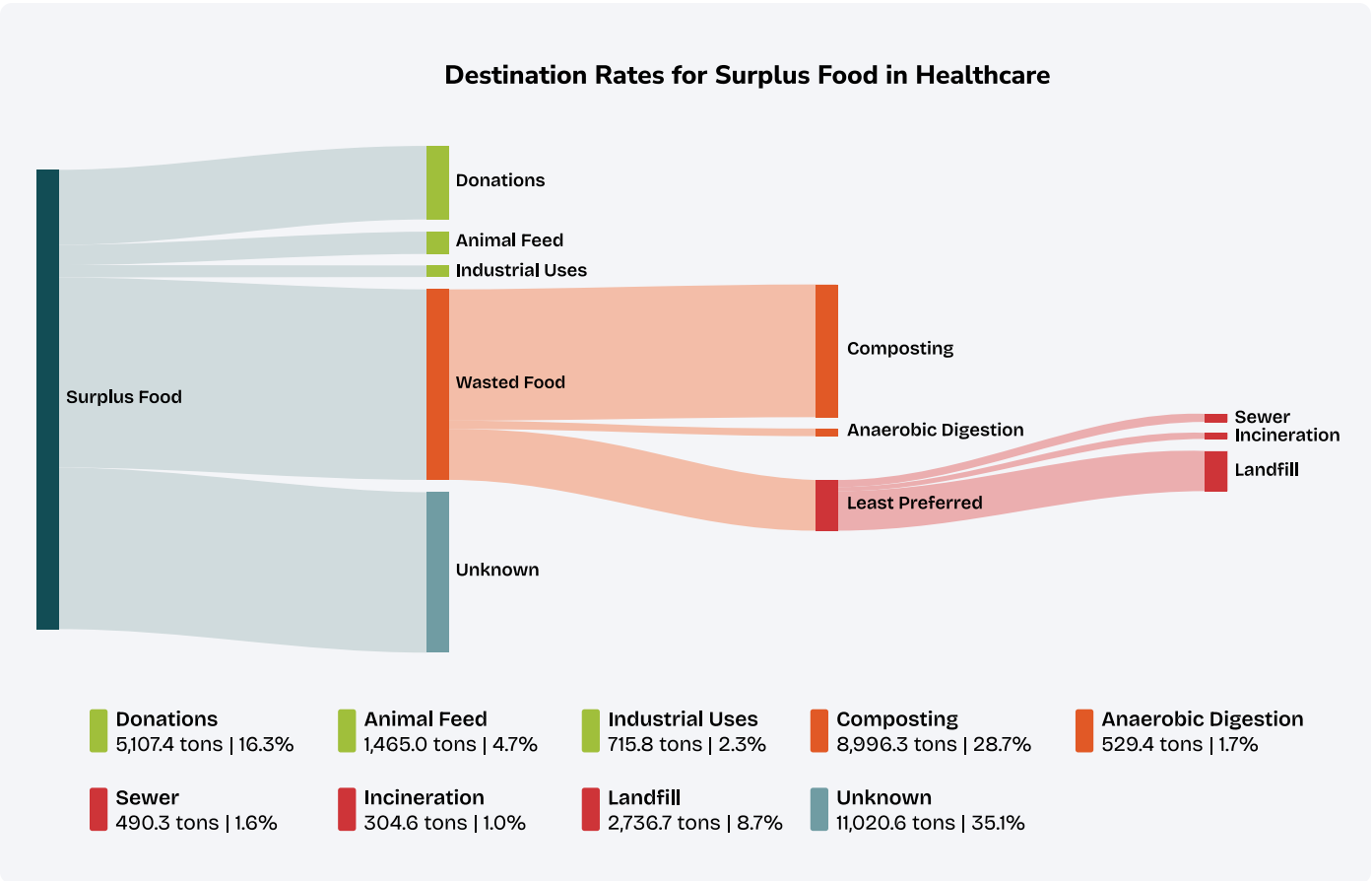
Destination Rates for Surplus Food in Healthcare

Preventing food from becoming waste through prevention strategies is the best way to reduce food waste. For food that cannot be prevented from becoming surplus, hospitals in Practice Greenhealth’s network are encouraged to follow the [EPA’s Wasted Food Scale](#) hierarchy of preferred destinations. This prioritizes surplus food for donation or animal feed over less preferred pathways, such as landfill.

Based on 2025 data, there are several promising trends in the segment. Composting had the second-highest destination rate at 28.7%, significantly higher than the Landfill rate of 8.7%. Additionally, Donations had a rate of 16.3%, much higher than 2024’s broader [foodservice industry average of 0.86%](#). Donations, along with Animal Feed and Industrial Uses (among the key preferred food waste pathways), account for over 20% of healthcare food surplus destinations in the report.



For public reporting, ReFED uses an Unknown destination rate of 30% or less as an indicator of more comprehensive destination data quality. While the Unknown destination rate is the highest at 35.1%, indicating there is still an opportunity for hospitals to improve destination reporting, the healthcare segment is still on track to reach the 30% threshold. Not including Unknown, less than 12% of surplus food is going to the least-preferred destinations: Sewer, Incineration, and Landfill. (Note: For the impacts analysis on page 6, Unknown tonnage is considered to have the same environmental impact as Landfill.)



Impact of Surplus Food in the Healthcare Segment

Understanding the social and environmental impacts of surplus food is critical for the healthcare segment to successfully measure progress against social, sustainability, and emissions-reduction goals. The impacts of the 210 facilities included in the destinations analysis of this report were calculated by ReFED’s Business Initiatives team and utilized U.S. average impact factors that underlie [ReFED’s Impact Calculator](#).

Impact of Surplus Food Reported Through Environmental Excellence Awards



MEAL DONATED

8.51 Million Meals

Enough to feed over 7,500 people for a year



TOTAL GHG FOOTPRINT

132,013 MTCO₂e

Equivalent to driving over 31,000 cars for a year



METHANE FOOTPRINT

1,510 MTCH₄

Equivalent to powering over 5,400 homes’ energy use for a year



WATER FOOTPRINT

12.91 Billion Gallons of Water

Equivalent to over 19,500 Olympic-sized swimming pools



SOCIAL COST OF CARBON²

\$35.94 Million

 **USFOODWASTEPACT.ORG**

6

Reducing Food Waste at the Source: Innovative Solutions

The environmental, social, and financial costs of surplus food are powerful motivators for hospitals to implement and sustain food waste reduction programs, and the overwhelming majority of facilities (87.9%) reported that their organizations were working to reduce food waste. 70% of facilities have employed a source reduction strategy, which is critical to preventing food from becoming waste in the first place.

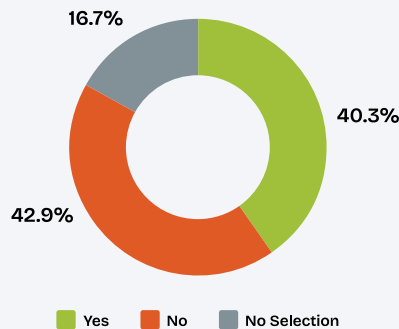
Healthcare Food Waste Tracking and Policy Development

Healthcare facilities are performing food waste audits prior to implementing waste reduction programs, which is a key step to illuminate food waste hotspots and provide insights into how to effectively target both prevention and diversion solutions tailored uniquely to their facilities. Of the 40% of reporting facilities that have performed a waste audit, the majority identified specific types, quantities, destinations, and causes of food in their waste stream.

Once food waste audits have provided valuable data about surplus food and waste, implementing a measurable and actionable food waste policy is the next step to operationalizing food waste reduction. Almost 80% of reporting facilities have a high-level plan or strategy to minimize food waste, but fewer than half have an established food waste policy, which more concretely translates food waste reduction goals into clear, actionable steps to be implemented across an organization or facility.

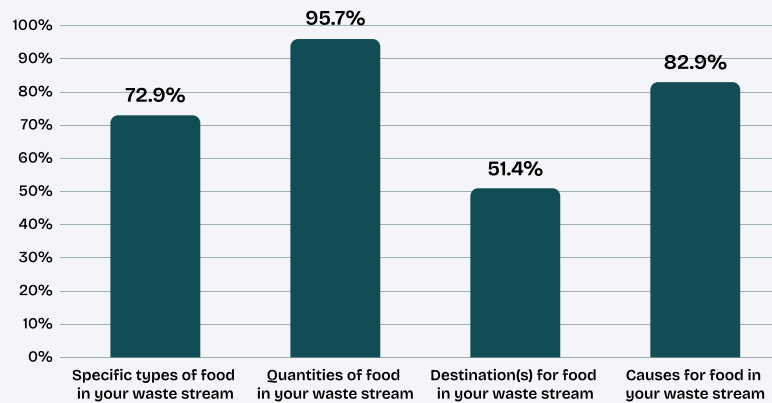
With hospital leadership buy-in to create and implement policies, including defined food waste reduction procedures, tracking methodology and tools, financial incentives, and institutional mechanisms, both hospital leadership and staff can be held accountable for the results.

Has the organization performed a food waste audit?



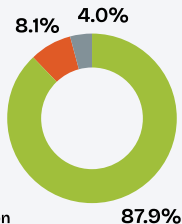
What is tracked in a food waste audit?

Percentage of respondents who responded "yes" to tracking specific metrics



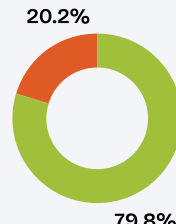
Is the organization working to reduce food loss and waste (activities include source reduction, donation, and food recycling)?

87.9% Yes, 8.1% No, 4.0% No Selection



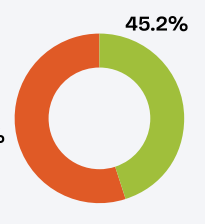
Does the organization have a plan or strategy in place to minimize food waste?

79.8% Yes, 20.2% No



Does the organization have a food waste policy?

54.8% Yes, 45.2% No



Beyond the Landfill: Diverting Surplus Food

Food waste prevention, which includes avoiding overordering ingredients and overproducing patient meals, is the first and best step to take to stop food waste. Preventing food from becoming waste in the first place minimizes the amount of food that needs to be diverted from waste destinations. For food waste that cannot be prevented, diverting surplus food to preferred destination pathways is an ideal intervention.

Hospital Success Stories

ANIMAL FEED

Facility A

When this Texas health system realized that 100% of its kitchen food waste was going to landfill and that its region lacked commercial composting vendors, it created a localized solution by partnering with a regenerative farm to pick up its food waste—at no cost to the farm—for use as animal feed. Manure produced by the chickens that eat the waste is then applied to the farm’s soil. In 2024, this diverted nearly 14,000 pounds of food waste from landfill.

Facility B

This organization is testing a highly sophisticated, multi-stream organics diversion program. It sends pre-consumer kitchen scraps to local farms for animal feed and uses vermicomposting for post-consumer patient-tray waste.

ANAEROBIC DIGESTION

Rush University Medical Center

This medical facility demonstrated the power of local partnerships. Rush Medical Center teamed up with Green Era Chicago, a community-based anaerobic digestion facility, urban farm, and food education center in an underserved neighborhood on Chicago’s South Side. In 2025, the hospital diverted over 21 tons of food from the landfill to Green Era’s digester, the output of which helps reach the community’s renewable energy goals.

Personalized Nutrition and the Room Service Revolution

Beyond the quantitative data, the healthcare segment is witnessing a qualitative shift in how food waste is perceived: through the lens of patient satisfaction rather than just operational overhead. Hospitals are increasingly focused on delivering meals that suit their patients’ particular needs, rather than a one-size-fits-all approach.

A major food waste win for healthcare foodservice has been the adoption of a “room service” model for patient feeding. While cook-chill delivers a limited selection of meals at set times, room service offers patients choices around what and when they eat, and the food is prepared to order.

Hospitals are moving to room service with the primary goal of improving the quality of the patient experience, but significantly reducing plate waste has been a welcome benefit. Hospitals implementing room service typically see plate waste decrease from as high as 40% down to 12–15%. When patients have more control over what they order, they typically eat more of what is on their plate, wasting less as a result.

Hospital Success Stories

PLATE WASTE

UC San Diego Health

With the cook-chill model, which delivered approximately 3.1 set meals per patient per day, the hospital saw average plate waste of 30%. Implementing the room service model, which averages 2.5 meals per patient per day, reduced plate waste to less than 5%. With the new room service model, hospitals also reported greater patient satisfaction, fresher meals that integrated seasonal produce, and overall savings that were reinvested to run service more efficiently.



Smart Kitchen Technology and Mobile Ordering

Measuring and tracking food waste is instrumental to implementing and maintaining progress for any waste-generating food business. Surplus can be measured manually, using paper logs or spreadsheets, and hospitals are increasingly adopting mobile ordering and automated tracking systems. These tools provide real-time data on patient preferences, allowing kitchens to adjust production and portion sizes accordingly.

- **Portion Control:** Systems that allow patients to select smaller portions help prevent waste.
- **Forecasting:** Digital inventory management helps chefs identify menu items that are not selling well or lead to excessive trim waste, allowing them to optimize purchasing and preparation accordingly.

Hospital Success Stories

FOOD WASTE TRACKING

Sutter Health

By integrating tech-based measurement and food recovery for community benefit, Sutter Health donated almost 65,000 pounds of food to 40 nonprofits. This prevented 283,000 pounds of carbon dioxide emissions.

Facility C

This facility is taking a comprehensive approach to tracking and diverting waste. It implemented Leanpath technology to capture data on food scraps and post-service waste to drive workflow changes, more clearly identifying where waste was occurring. For back-of-house waste, it partnered with a community-based anaerobic digestion facility for disposal. This partnership ensures that the food waste is processed into renewable energy and soil amendments.



“Food waste tracking gives us the information we need to make meaningful change. When we understand what we are wasting and why, we can improve purchasing, production, and operational practices while reducing unnecessary costs. It also creates opportunities to redirect safe, usable food to support and feed members of our community. Reducing food waste allows us to be better stewards of our resources, strengthen our communities, and lessen our environmental impact while building a more sustainable healthcare foodservice operation.”

— CASEY WHITMORE, DIRECTOR FOOD AND NUTRITION SERVICES,
ALTA BATES SUMMIT MEDICAL CENTER

Looking Ahead: 2026 and Beyond

As the U.S. Food Waste Pact enters its third year of national reporting for the retail and Business & Industry foodservice sectors, the healthcare segment is poised for deeper integration and accelerated impact. The upcoming reporting cycle will focus on several key pillars, including expanding network reach and impact and addressing barriers to entry for new and existing facilities in the network.

Strategic Goals for Food Waste Reduction in Healthcare for 2026 and Beyond

Scaling the Employee Engagement Toolkit:

Deploying the Pact's successful employee engagement model in hospital kitchens will empower frontline workers to reduce waste.

Looking beyond landfill: Healthcare facilities can reduce the amount of scraps and wasted food that end up in the landfill by preventing food from going to waste in the first place and by employing circular waste reduction strategies.

Supporting communities through donation:

Healthcare teams on the ground can give back to their communities by partnering with local food rescue organizations to ensure edible surplus food reaches people who need it.

Improving operations and cost savings: Hospitals will continue to harness the benefits of tackling food waste beyond its environmental impacts, including improving bottom lines and increasing patient foodservice efficiency, particularly through food waste prevention.

Practice Greenhealth's next reporting cycle:

Tracking and reporting on discarded food, including surplus rates, causes of food waste, and the impacts of new service models are key to maintaining momentum to cut food waste and associated operational costs. The deadline to report 2026 data is in April 2027.

Addressing Remaining Gaps and Barriers

Food safety mythbusting: While food safety is always critical, it is especially important in healthcare. That said, unfounded safety concerns could lead to unnecessary discarding of edible food. It is recommended that foodservice staff receive continuing education on food safety practices and on manufacturer date labels, which are often poorly understood. Additionally, federal legislation, as outlined in the [Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Food Donation Act](#), protects food donors from liability. Familiarization with donation practices and qualifying items can help demystify barriers to recycling safe, unused food.

Leadership education: Organizational awareness and education around food waste and the bottom-line benefits are crucial to implementing change. Understandably, healthcare leadership is not always well-versed in the co-benefits of sustainability initiatives, but this lack of awareness can prevent hospitals from taking the first steps toward realizing food waste-related efficiencies.

Inertia to change: Reducing food waste requires changes to long-standing operational models. Educating and engaging employees on the environmental, financial, and social benefits can ensure long-lasting dedication and follow-through to tackling waste.



How Healthcare Leaders Can Take Action

The progress seen in 2025 is a testament to the dedication of sustainability leaders across the country. However, the path to long-term food waste reduction requires every hospital to act.

Join the Practice Greenhealth network for support in goal setting, implementation, and tracking.

Report your data through Practice Greenhealth:

Participating in the Practice Greenhealth Environmental Excellence Awards is the first step toward visibility and accountability.

Institutionalize your commitment: Formalize your food waste reduction goals and integrate them into your facility's strategic plan and SOPs.

Take advantage of Pact resources:

- Read and implement ideas from the [Employee Engagement Toolkit](#).
- Receive technical support, individualized annual reports benchmarking your facility's progress, access to peer learning groups, and one-on-one assistance through Health Care Without Harm's participation in the Pact.
- [Practice Greenhealth's food waste solutions guidance](#), which aligns with the EPA food recovery hierarchy and evolving state and federal regulations, leads you through each strategy from source reduction to food donation to recycling and will help you make a plan for achieving your waste reduction goals.



For the Food System

Though this report focuses on the healthcare segment's progress, food waste is a systemic problem that requires multistakeholder solutions.

For Food Recovery Organizations

Reach out to your community's healthcare facilities to partner:

- Healthcare facilities need food donation partners. Ask how you can support their food donation program.
- Participate in [Community Health Needs Assessments](#), which nonprofit hospitals must complete every three years. Involvement of food-related organizations was strongly correlated with facilities having a community benefit program addressing healthy food access or food insecurity. Funding or resources for food recovery programs may be available through hospitals as part of their community benefit spending.
- Connect with hospital "food as medicine" programs, which may include opportunities to donate medically tailored meals.

For Contracted Foodservice Operators

Make the business case to the contract holder:

Ensure segment best practices are shared and implemented broadly, with a focus on establishing baseline expectations for sustainability and food waste. Utilize this report to elevate food waste reduction and diversion to the client proactively as a cost-saving, patient experience and operational efficiency measure. More information on making the business case for food waste reduction is available [here](#).

Accelerate your food waste reduction efforts:

ReFED Business Services offers custom analytics, capacity building, and advisory services for food businesses no matter where they are in their food waste reduction journey. Learn more [here](#).

Endnotes

- 1 ReFED defines surplus food as all food that goes unsold or unused by a business or that goes uneaten at home or in restaurants—including food and inedible parts that are donated, fed to livestock animals, repurposed to produce other products, or go to any of the destinations represented in food waste.
- 2 The social cost of carbon is a measure of the cost of future damages to society that will result from climate change—including crop losses, destruction or damage of infrastructure, and health impacts during extreme events like heat waves.

Acknowledgments

This report was made possible in collaboration with Health Care Without Harm, ReFED, and World Wildlife Fund. Special thanks to the signatories of the U.S. Food Waste Pact and the members of Practice Greenhealth for their leadership and transparency.

About the U.S. Food Waste Pact

The U.S. Food Waste Pact is a national voluntary agreement to help food businesses accelerate progress toward their waste reduction targets. Led by national nonprofit partners ReFED and World Wildlife Fund, the U.S. Food Waste Pact is aligned around the global framework of “Target, Measure, Act” to help food businesses reduce waste within their operations. For more information about the U.S. Food Waste Pact, visit usfoodwastepact.org.



About Health Care Without Harm

Health Care Without Harm seeks to transform healthcare worldwide so that it reduces its environmental impact, becomes a community anchor for sustainability, and a leader in the global movement for environmental health and justice. Learn more at noharm.org.



About Practice Greenhealth

Practice Greenhealth is the leading sustainable health care organization, delivering environmental solutions to hospitals and health systems in the United States and Canada. Learn more at practicegreenhealth.org.



U.S. Food Waste Pact Signatories

For a complete list of all current U.S. Food Waste Pact signatories, visit usfoodwastepact.org.

