

Food Recovery Infrastructure & Needs

Identifying gaps, opportunities, and solutions
to reduce food waste in SWANCC communities



**Solid Waste Agency of
Northern Cook County**



Illinois Circularity Conference | October 14, 2025

Food Recovery Infrastructure Assessment (FRIA)

Goals & Methodology

- Local and regional collaboration + infrastructure improvement
- Resources and tools to maximize food recovery through rescue and redistribution + recycling of otherwise wasted food

Database Development

- Identified food supplier and recovery contacts within the study area

Outreach & Data Collection

- Visits, calls, and emails
- Stakeholder interviews and surveys

Extrapolation

- Representative review; data and response distribution across geography and sectors
- Comparative review and vetting of existing research

Data Collection & Analysis

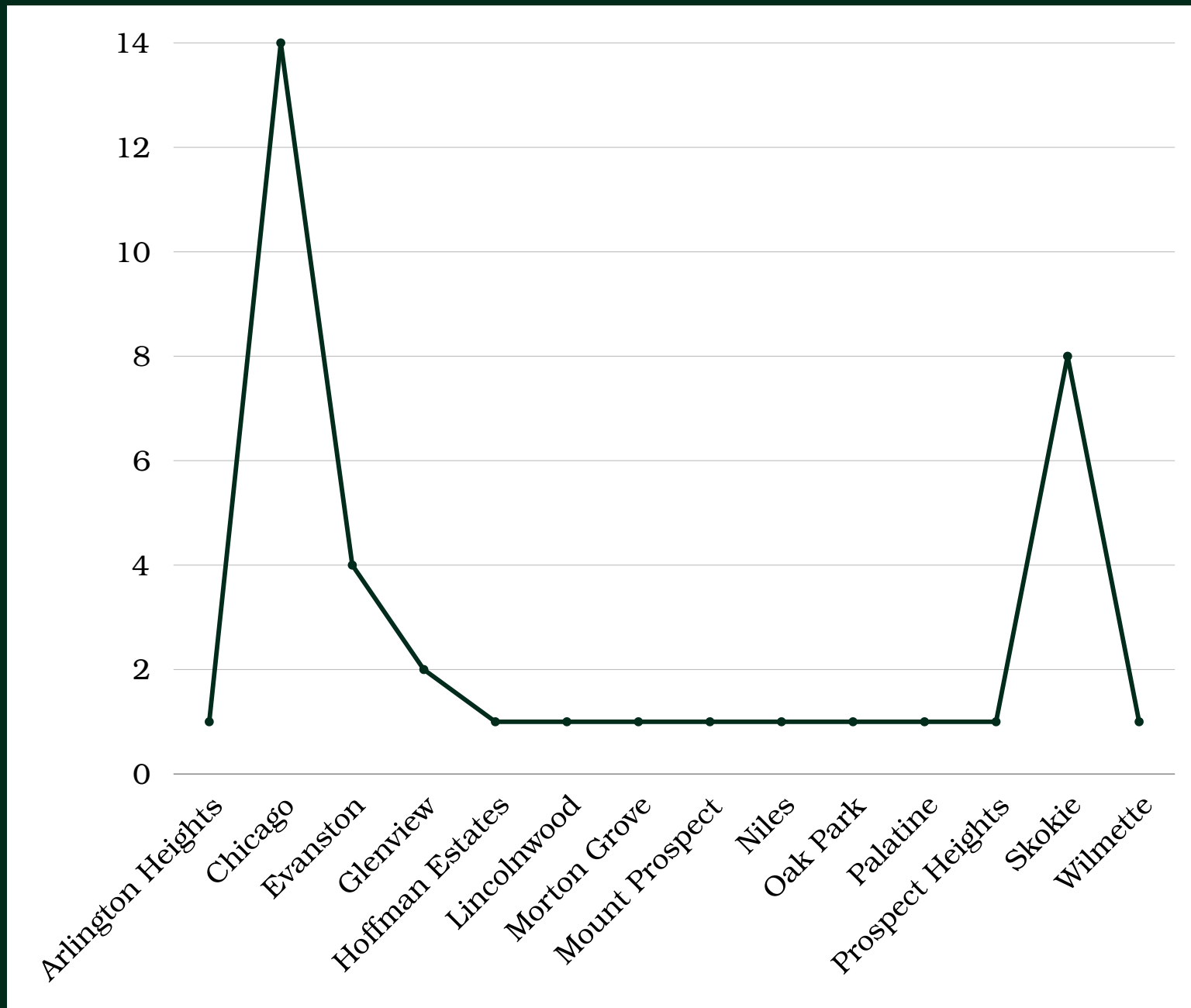
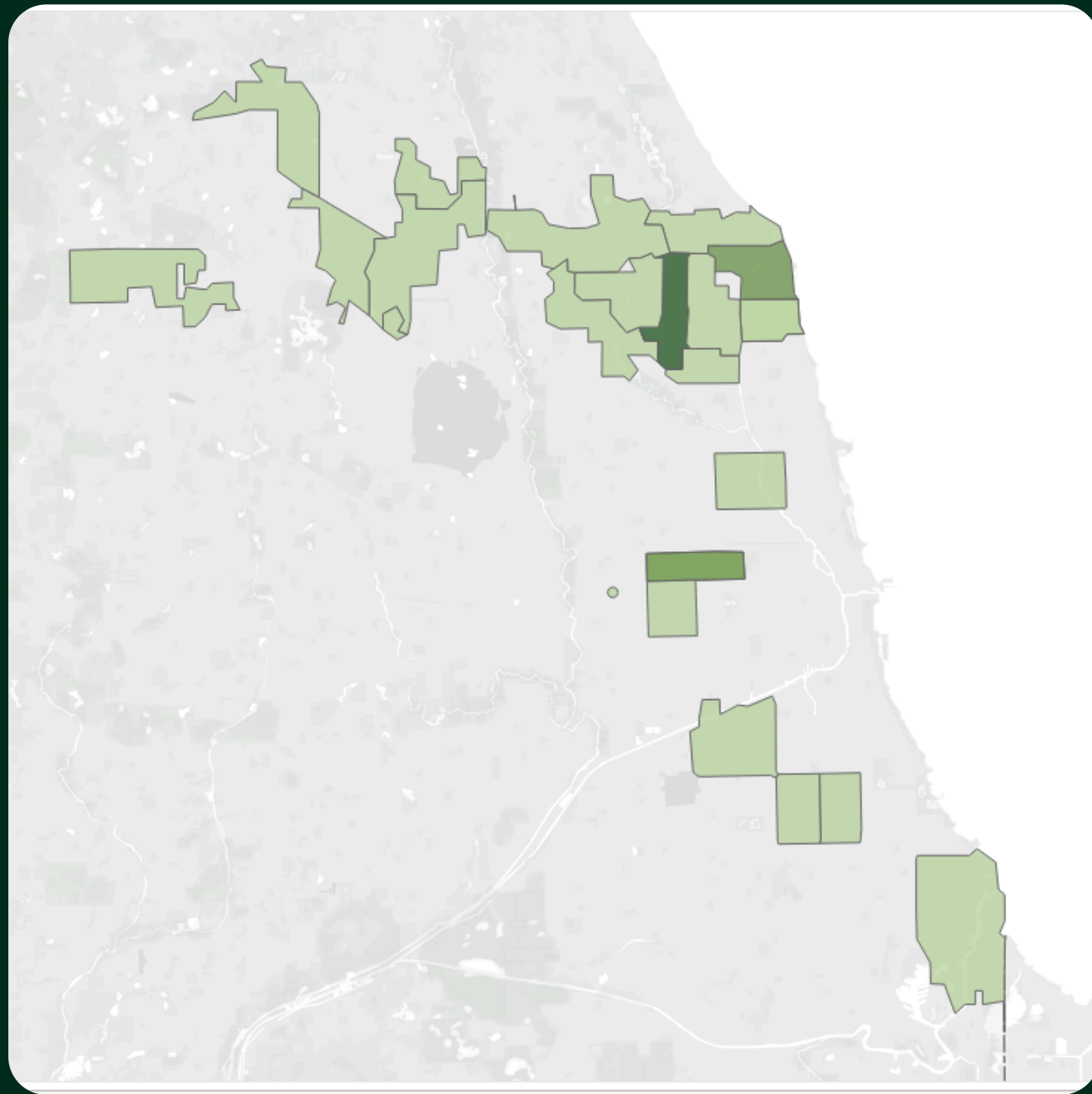
Initial Data Collected

- Direct communication with targets:
 - 401+ business/organizations contacted
- Proxy dataset:
 - 38 locations (represented by 25 survey responses)
- Sectors represented:
 - Grocery stores, Restaurant/Food Service, Special Event, Food Distributors, Organic Waste Recycling, Food Recovery Organization, Other
- Collection period:
 - April – Sept 2025

Analysis To Date

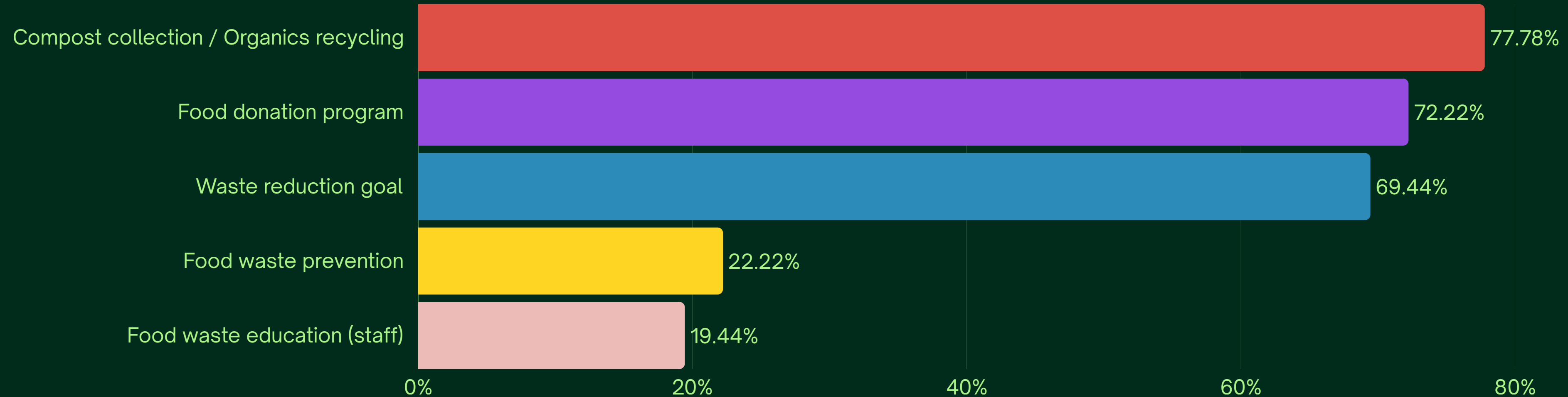
- Response/engagement, by municipality & sector
- Service areas, by food rescue & organics recycling
- Current practices & barriers across sectors; collective opportunities
- Weekly food donation values; volume concentration by sector
- Local findings compared to broader research

Geographic Distribution: By Municipality



Most respondents clustered in 3 municipalities. This represents an opportunity to establish more awareness and activity in underrepresented municipalities.

Most Commonly Reported Practices



What it shows:

- Composting is more commonly reported than food donation
- Responses suggest a correlataion between composting and waste reduction goals

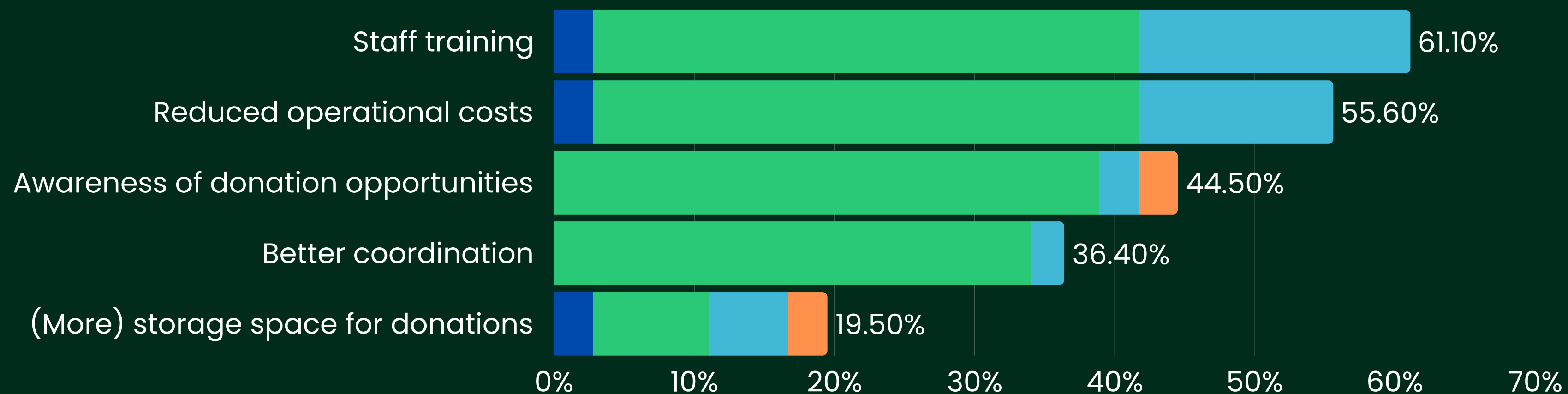
What it means:

- Some respondents mentioned food donation as informal arrangements conducted without tracking or official partnerships

Next Steps:

- Support food recovery education highlighting liability protection, community impact, and tracking solutions helping entities establish measurability to increase value

Most Commonly Reported Barriers [by Sector]



What it shows:

- Training and costs are most common barriers overall

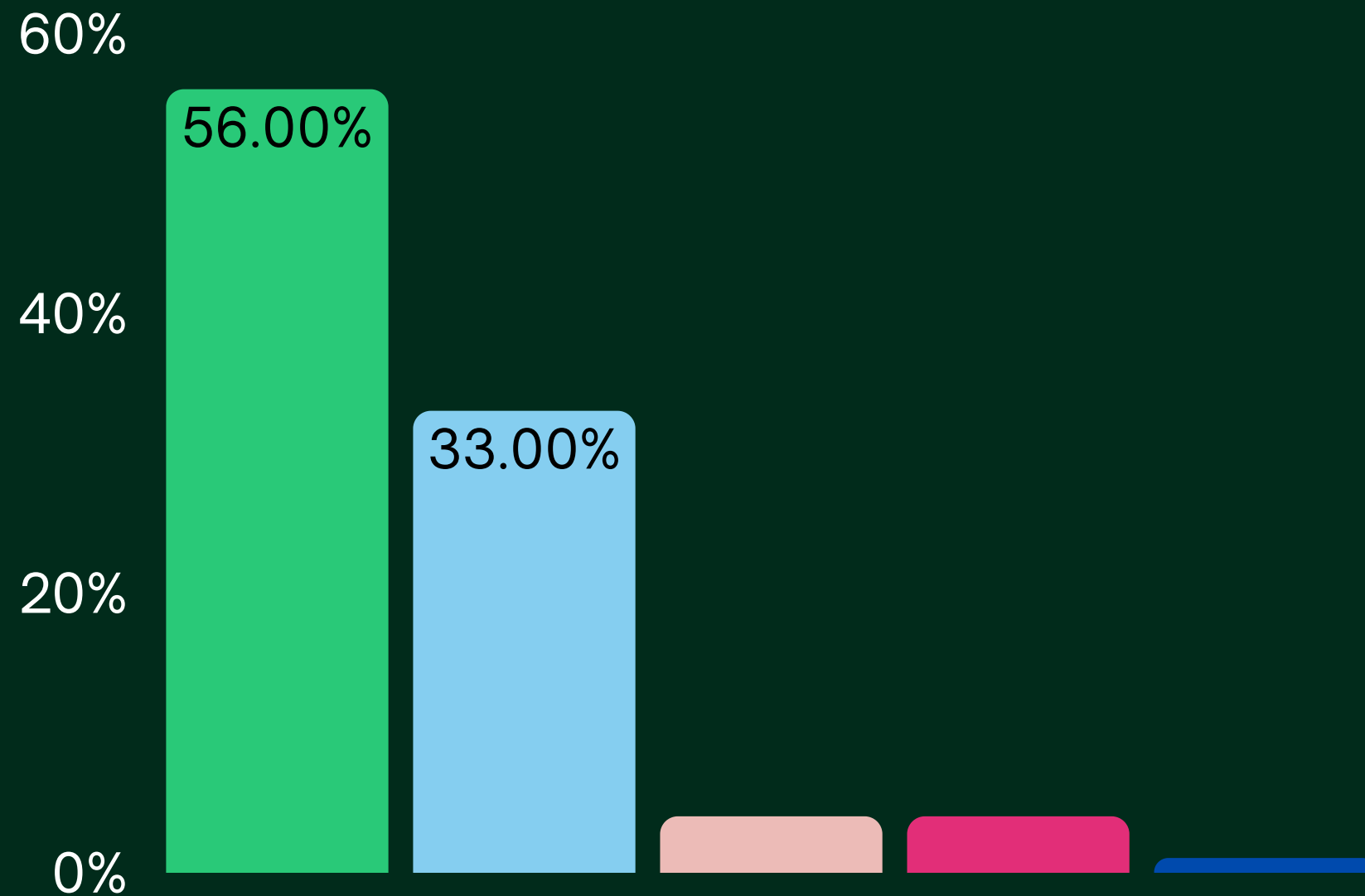
What it means:

- Gaps in education, followed by infrastructure, may prevent participation

Next Steps:

- Ensure food donors know where to find appropriate training materials
- Explore opportunities for shared storage capacity in each local community

Top Donation Activity [by Sector]



% of Respondents Reporting Donations, Categorized by Sector

What it shows:

- Based on our respondents, grocery stores generate and donate significantly more than restaurants.

What it means:

- Food recovery in SWANCC communities is heavily dependent on one sector.

Next steps:

- Develop new food rescue programs with other sector businesses in alignment with existing grocery recovery programs and partnerships.

Reported Donation Data [by Sector]

RESTAURANT / FOOD SERVICE

- 94 lbs weekly average per restaurant

GROCERY / RETAIL

- 1,000 lbs weekly average per grocery store

SPECIAL EVENT / FACILITY

- 9,500+ lbs per week from one venue, during its season

“Research conducted by DePaul University found that, of the 274 grocery stores they mapped, less than 50% had food donation partnerships or were engaged in any food rescue operations.”

– Chicago Food Rescue Assessment 9/10/24

Exponential Potential

Extrapolated Local Data

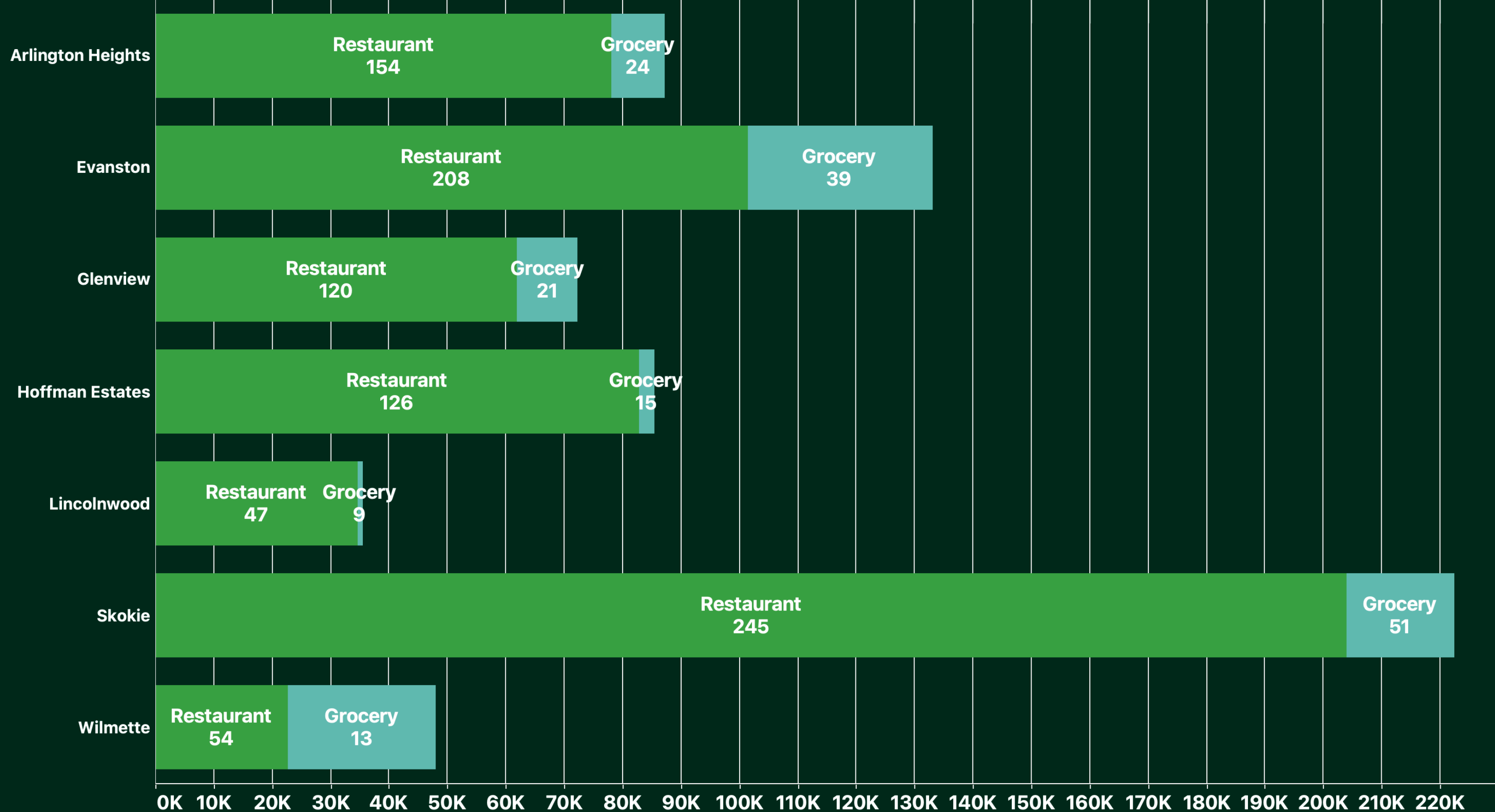
- Reported recovery (proxy data) provided specific points of reference
- Estimates of potential surplus were derived from US-EPA Excess Food Opportunities Map 3.1 [9/29/25], converted to weekly averages per sector location
- # of locations per municipality, identified through federal data and project research, was used to estimate overall weekly surplus figures

How to read the upcoming graph:

- *Numbers on bars = # of locations per two key sectors in sample of (5) municipalities*
- *Bar length = estimated weekly pounds of surplus*
- *Green = Restaurant / Food Service*
- *Blue = Grocery Store / Mixed Retailer*

Estimated Weekly Total of Surplus Food per Municipality

From Restaurant/Food Service and Grocery/Mixed Retail Sectors



Surplus Food in Pounds (lbs)

Recovery Infrastructure [Pantries]

COMMON PRACTICES

- **Collaborate** with other pantries and food recovery partners
- Have **Food As Medicine** Programs
- Recycle (**Compost**) inedible food waste
- Use **MealConnect** (if affiliated with Feeding America)



DONATIONS REPORTED

- 5,000 lbs rescued per week, per pantry
- 15–33% of food acquired through donation

Have space to receive more, but **constrained by volunteer capacity**

Anecdotes: Quotes from Community

On logistics

"My big problem is a lot of times – my excess food is Saturdays – they don't accept it at those hours."

"If we have surplus food, who do we call?"

On resources

"Time is so valuable to anyone in this industry...if you ask me to do it today, I'd be like, get get in line"

"We don't want to 'look bad' by donating food our client paid for because we made too much."

On regulations

"Until the State protects us from liability, my lawyer told us not to donate."

• **What it shows:**

- Businesses face practical barriers – not necessarily opposition to food recovery.

• **What it means:**

- Organizations want to participate but lack infrastructure and knowledge

• **Next Steps:**

- Create support systems addressing barriers via educational materials on liability protection and training programs.

On need

"Rescue leads across the country are reporting factors like changes in federal benefits have caused demand to triple. We need to grow supply by a factor of three!"

On training

"If you don't instill those values and instill those practices early on, it's really hard to convince anyone who works in food service to do it while the plane's already in the air"

On feasibility

"The only reason to not donate excess food is because you just don't want to. Liability, logistics, and timing are all concerns that can be addressed."

High Level Takeaways

Food Businesses – GAPS

- AWARENESS OF TAX INCENTIVES
- LIABILITY / PENALTY CONCERNS
- OPERATIONALIZING FOOD DONATION

Food Recovery Organizations – NEEDS

- MORE FOOD AND MORE DONORS
- DEDICATED STAFF TO COORDINATE RESCUES
- AWARENESS OF FOOD RESCUE & ACCESS

Local Food Recovery & Solutions Forum

Gathering of Municipal Leaders and Stakeholders from 11 SWANCC
Communities on October 6, 2025

Highlights include:

- **Presentation of FRIA Findings ('ground-truthing')**
- **Safe Donation Practices**
- **Municipal & Pantry Perspectives**
- **Solutions Sprint**
- **Calls To Action**

Key Steps for Safely Donating Foods

Donated food should be handled safely and according to [federal, state or local food codes](#). Here are some steps you should keep in mind when donating food:

1. Make sure food packages are properly labeled. For example, foods that contain major food allergens must list the allergens on the product label.
2. Foods that have not been opened should be donated in their original packaging.
3. Store foods safely. Keep away from sources of contamination, such as dust or debris, spoiled or recalled foods, and from other products like cleaning supplies.
4. Keep foods at their safe temperatures. Hot foods should be stored and held at 135°F or above, and cold foods should be stored and held at 41°F or below.
5. Make sure anyone handling donated foods, including volunteers, is trained in clean hygiene practices
6. Donated foods should be wholesome.
7. When transporting foods, make sure the vehicle has the equipment needed to keep foods stored cold or hot at their safe and appropriate temperatures.
8. Keep proper records.
9. For more information on how to store, prepare, package, display and label food, retail food establishments may wish to refer to the Food Code (www.fda.gov/foodcode), which is a model for best practices to ensure the safe handling of food in a retail setting.

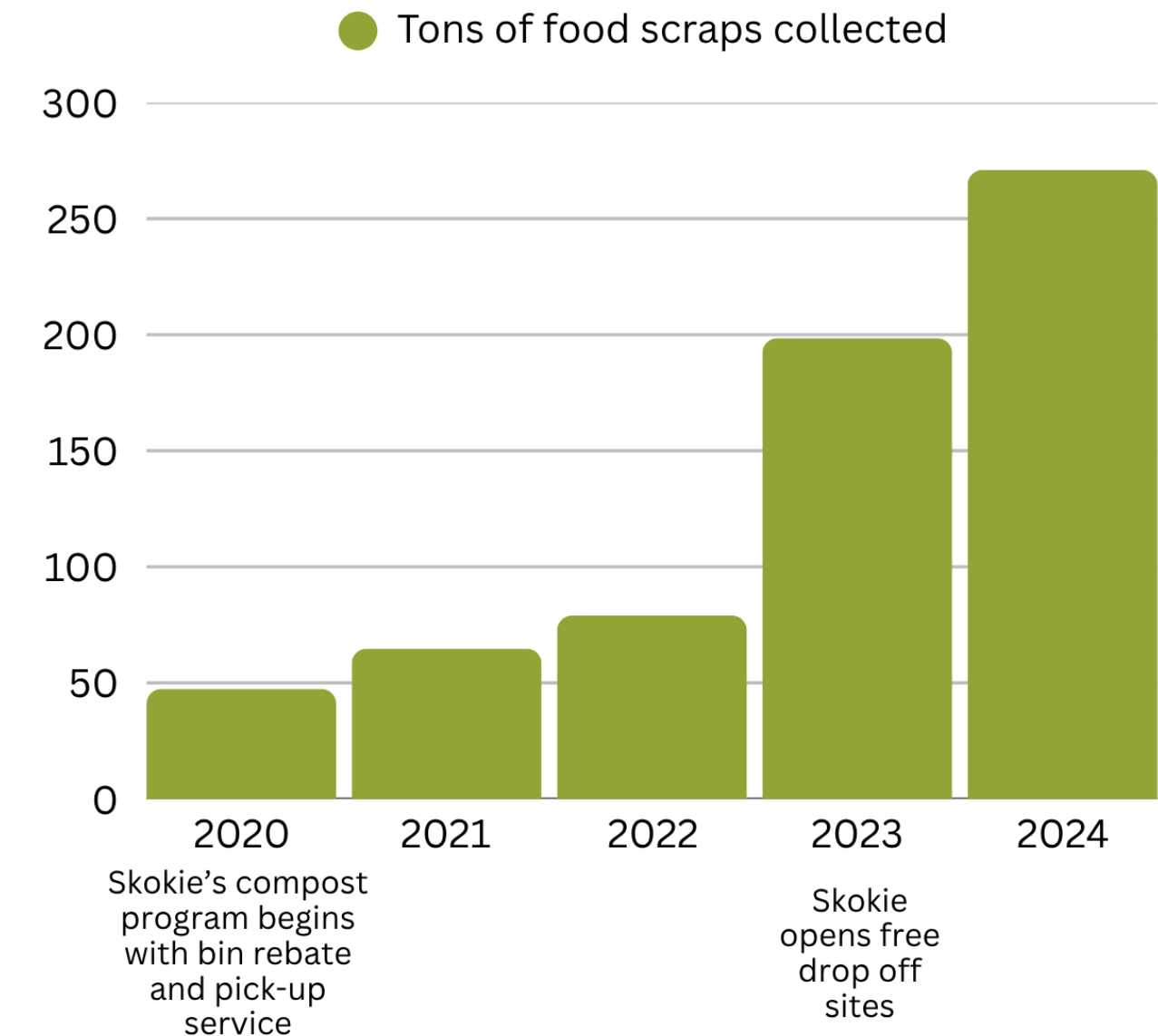
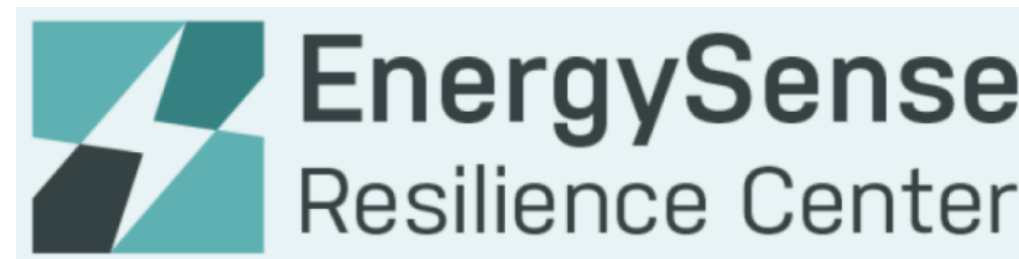
Liability Protection for Food Donation

- **Federal Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Food Donation Act (as amended)**: This law provides liability protection to individuals, businesses, and nonprofits that donate food in good faith.
 - **Qualifying donations**: Donated food must be "apparently wholesome" and given to a nonprofit organization for distribution to people in need.
 - **Direct donations**: The law was amended in 2022 to extend liability protection to "qualified direct donors" (including restaurants, grocers, and caterers) who donate food directly to people in need.
 - **Protection limits**: This protection does not apply in cases of gross negligence or intentional misconduct.
- **Illinois Good Samaritan Food Donor Act**: This state law mirrors and reinforces the federal protections.
 - **Broad protection**: It provides immunity from civil and criminal liability for those who, in good faith, donate perishable, canned, farm, or prepared foods.
 - **Exclusions**: Protections do not apply if a donor shows reckless disregard for the recipient's health or knowingly provides tainted food.

Municipal Framework for Success:

- **Environmental Sustainability Plan**
- **Implementation Framework***
- **Green Business Recognition Program**
- **Composting Milestones**
- **Food Recovery**
 - Mobile Application connecting food establishments directly to food recovery organizations or individuals
 - Support and build on existing efforts with Commission on Family Services, Farmers' Market & Niles Township Food Pantry

- **A Collaborative Approach**



Solutions Sprint

HOW MIGHT WE LOCALLY...
WHAT ARE EXISTING BARRIERS TO...
WHO/WHAT ENTITIES MAY BE BEST POSITIONED TO HELP...

PRE-COMPETITIVE



**INDIVIDUAL OR
COLLABORATIVE**

HYPER-LOCAL, WITHIN ONE MUNICIPALITY, OR REGIONAL

Cheater Questions:

How do we make it easier?

Who Cares?

How might we locally...	What are existing barriers to...	Who/what entities may be best positioned or engaged to help...
Consolidate donations into fewer, more substantial rescues	Increase frequency of rescues	Increase food recovery awareness & education among potential donors
Share transport and storage	Increase recipients' food quality and choices	Increase awareness of financial incentives (tax credits) to offset the costs associated with donating food
Increase cold chain infrastructure	Connect culturally preferable surplus with those who prefer it	Establish a Food Recovery Liaison position at a municipal level (like the Federal Food Recovery Act introduced in 2017)
Get more volunteers	Best utilize close-to-expiry items	Mandate edible food recovery (and diversion of inedible) like CA SB 1383
Convert surplus food into grab & go / hot meals	Reduce food waste up the supply chain - at Distributor/Warehouse level? Manufacturer level?	Get more businesses to donate food

CALL TO ACTION

**Food donation is safe, promotes a circular economy,
and is good business practice!**

Municipalities

- Provide resources for education and training: its ok to donate!
- Engage businesses through recognition, leading to voluntary reporting
- Explore opportunities for shared transportation capacity and rescue coordination

Businesses

- Share stories and best practices to inspire increased recovery and community impact
- Consider food rescue technology platforms to streamline and track donations
- Corporations: consider potential to anchor local rescue infrastructure



THANK YOU!

*to everyone dedicated
to this work*



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