

Seven Steps to Organizing a Local Food Not Bombs

At the outset, starting a Food Not Bombs might seem like more than you can handle. Work on the basics, taking one step at a time. There is no need to feel pressured into accomplishing everything all at once. It might take a couple of weeks to get things rolling or it may take months. One person cannot be a Food Not Bombs group, but one person can start one.

Once you have made the decision to start a local Food Not Bombs group, talk to some other people you know who might be interested in working with you. It might be a group of friends, or members of an existing group, or you can put up flyers announcing your intentions and see who responds. Pick a meeting date, time, and place and gather everyone who is interested together to talk about what you would like to do. The following is a step by step process to get your food operation up and running. Again, these are suggestions. Because of your unique situation, you may need to add steps or ignore steps or do them in a different order. Whatever works for your group is the best path to follow.

Step 1: Start by getting a phone number and a mailing address. By using either a voice mailbox or an answering machine, you can have an out-going message with information about the next meeting time and place and you can receive messages so you never miss a call. Besides, who wants to sit by a phone waiting for it to ring; we'd rather be out in the streets feeding people. Likewise, use a commercial mailbox or post office box for your permanent address. As your membership changes, your mailing address can remain the same and you won't have to redo your literature. Responsibility for collecting and responding to the mail can be easily rotated. And, most importantly, you won't have uninvited guests showing up at your house wanting to know where is the free food.

Step 2: Next, make flyers announcing the existence of a local Food Not Bombs. By handing them out at events, posting them around town, and/or mailing them out to your friends, you will start getting phone calls, mail, and additional volunteers. It is helpful to have regularly scheduled weekly meetings or always know when the next meeting is so you can ask people to attend. This helps newcomers feel welcome and tells them how to become involved in your program.

Step 3: The next step is to arrange for the use of a vehicle. This can be a major challenge or it might not. Between the members of your group, there might be enough vehicles of the right size for your needs. If not, you might be able to arrange borrowing a van or truck from a sympathetic church group or similar organization. If you are very lucky, you might be able to convince someone to donate one to you. And, if none of the above leads to obtaining a vehicle, you can always hold fundraising events to raise money specifically for the purchase of a van.

Step 4: With flyers in hand, begin looking for sources of food. The first places to approach are the local food co-ops and health food stores. These types of stores tend to be more supportive and are a good place to practice your approach. Ask the produce managers if they ever throw away any excess produce. Explain that you are willing to collect any food which is still edible but which will not or cannot be sold. Tell them you plan to give the food to shelters and soup kitchens to feed hungry people. (You need to decide if you want to tell them that some of the food will be used for political organizing or even to tell them the name of the group. At some stores, this might not be an issue; at others, it might be better left unsaid, especially at first, until they get to know you better.) If they are interested and willing, arrange for a regular time to pick-up the food each day or as often as is practical. Early on, also visit bakeries and ask for day old bread, muffins, and bagels. Eventually, when you are able to handle the volume, start approaching food distributors, warehouses, and producers. When and where it is appropriate, leave literature which explains what Food Not Bombs does.

Step 5: Deliver this bulk food to shelters and meal kitchens. It is important to get to know the food

pantries and soup kitchens in your area. Learn where they are located, whom they serve, and how many they serve. This information will help you plan your delivery route and distribute appropriate types and amounts of food to each program. Usually, it is desirable to arrange a regular delivery schedule with each kitchen. As your delivery route develops, the schedule of free food programs in our community will become clear to you. With this information, you will know where and when there is a need to provide a hot meal and, therefore, where and when to set-up a Food Not Bombs table out in public on the street or in a park.

Step 6: It won't be long before the network of a few stores and bakeries will be giving more food than you will be able to distribute to shelters. (Even if this doesn't happen right away in your area, you can still start to skim some food out of the flow without affecting the bulk food distribution part of the program.) With the extra food, start to prepare meals to serve on the streets. At first, go to rallies and demonstrations. There, the group can recruit more volunteers, collect donations, and lift the spirits of those at the event. Giving out meals at a rally builds community and supports the cause in a very direct way.

Step 7: Once there are enough people involved, consider serving meals one day a week to the homeless on the street in a visible way. Organize into teams; one to cook the food and one to set-up and serve the food. Cooking and serving in teams builds community within the group and is great fun. Every group has different kitchen arrangements. Some use several people's home kitchens, some use a donated church kitchen or other industrial-strength kitchen, and some use propane stoves and cook right at the site. Pick areas which have high volume and diverse pedestrian traffic. Locations which are highly visible are desirable because part of our mission is to help make the invisible homeless more visible to those better off, economically. Also, we want to reach out to everyone with our political message; and we want to be very accessible. Often people without homes gather near the government center because they are seeking assistance of one kind or another. Why not set-up once a week outside the federal building? Over time, it is possible to grow to serving food on the street every day of the week at a different site each day!

All our food is vegetarian, that is, no meat, dairy, or eggs. This is for many reasons, but for now, two will do. First, the potential for problems with food spoilage are greatly reduced when dealing strictly with vegetables. With the process we use, we rarely hold the food we collect for more than a couple of hours. Second, teaching people about the economic and health benefits of a vegetarian diet is directly connected to a healthy attitude about ourselves, each other, and the planet as a whole. It is also a direct challenge to the injustice of the military/industrial economic system. This is not to suggest that it is our policy that everyone should be vegetarian or that eating meat is wrong. We encourage awareness of vegetarianism for political and economic reasons. We only prepare food which is strictly from vegetable sources so people will always know and trust Food Not Bombs food has this standard whenever they come to our table. At times, we do serve already prepared dairy and meat products which are donated to us because we believe eating is more important than being politically correct; however, we do not cook with animal products.



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