

Leftover Restaurant Food Helps Needy With New App

The U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates that 40 percent of all food produced in the U.S. goes to waste. Raj Karmani wants to drop that to zero.

Through his firm Zero Percent, Karmani is seeking to revolutionize the food waste industry in Chicago.

5 The idea is simple: Zero Percent's drivers act as a roving transport, picking up surplus food from Chicago grocery stores and restaurants and delivering that food to nonprofits the same day.

There is no downtime for the food to sit and spoil, so perishable items are OK, and encouraged.

Paul Biasco describes the groundbreaking way Zero Percent is able to turn a profit and help those in need: It's about delivering healthy food, such as fresh produce and even fish and meat, rather than purely non-perishable items.

10 "There's no hub at all, so it's nice and fresh," said Emmett Ryan, chief rescue officer for Zero Percent.

So far Lou Malnati's, The Signature Room, Eataly, Yolc, Hannah's Bretzel and The Market Place Foodstore are among the early adopters. Most recently Au Cheval, Longman & Eagle and Perry's Deli got onboard.

15 More than 25 non-profits that have signed up for Zero Percent's services including Thresholds Dincin Center for Recovery, a community-based recovery center that serves people with mental illnesses.

Since signing on with Zero Percent, Thresholds has been able to transform its meal program, officials said. The center provides about 120 meals a day and purchases about 100 pounds a week from Zero Percent, according to Thomas Kinley, program director for the center.

20 "What they bring is very helpful for us. We are on a very tight budget," Kinley said. "Particularly, the produce they are able to provide helps us to provide healthy meals."

Nonprofits pay 30 cents a pound and have their choice of whatever is in the van that day.

Zero Percent started two years ago in Champaign, where Karmani was studying to obtain his PhD in computer science at the University of Illinois, Karmani, 31, frequented an Einstein's Bagel and learned their model was to bake everything fresh each morning.

25 "Once I asked the owner what he does with the extras at the end of the day because it's nearly impossible to predict the traffic," Karmani said. "He said he was throwing them away."

Zero Percent was born.

30 Karmani, who now lives in Lakeview, has used his computer science skills to build an app and user interface that not only makes it easy to schedule pickups and drop offs at exact times, but also provides valuable data for restaurants and grocers.

"Traditional donations have been a lot of canned goods, packaged goods, but how do we get the most efficient healthy food that was just being thrown away because there's no solution?" said Zero Percent's founder Raj Karmani.

35 On an average day, Zero Percent's team picks up and delivers about 1,500 pounds of food that would have otherwise been tossed in a dumpster.

The drivers weigh each batch of food they pick up, log it digitally, and are able to show the restaurants exactly how much of each product they are wasting.

Businesses that use the service pay a flat monthly fee depending on the number of pickups a week and whether they want food waste data and tax deductible receipts.

40 "It really started as a cool app to solve a problem that I saw," Karmani said. "We want to give value for businesses. We don't want to stop just at charity."

Businesses are able to write off some of the waste on tax returns if they choose and other businesses have been able to fine-tune their purchasing patterns.

45 Jeff Adams, associate director of operations at the Inspiration Corporation in Uptown, said the partnership with Zero Percent this year has been a success.

The Inspiration Corporation features a food service training class to help homeless or near-homeless people find jobs in the kitchen and uses many of the items from Zero Percent in their training.

“It’s a great idea and I think the price is right,” he said. “I’m sure this can expand so much more. There’s so much more food being wasted that would come in handy and keep our budget even lower.”

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