

Food Waste Study

Corey Gustafik

Kings College Wilkes Barre

Meals on Wheels

June 10th 2025

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Introduction

In the United States, approximately 35 percent of the food supply is wasted, resulting in around 149 billion pounds according to the USDA's Economic Research Service 2024.⁶ Food waste, landfill material being the largest category, represents not only the lost nutrients that could have supported families in need but also the wasted resources like water, energy, and labor that were used in logistics. Reducing food waste is not a single effort but it requires collaboration among federal, state, tribal, local governments, faith-based organizations, environmental agencies, communities, consumers, and food supply chains.^{1,2,3,6}

Globally, food waste is still a critical issue and needs to be addressed by all parties involved. In 2016, the USDA and the EPA launched the U.S. 2030 Food Loss and Waste Reduction Goal, aiming to cut food loss and waste in half by 2030.^{1,6} The EPA defines food waste as food sent to landfills, combustion, sewers, anaerobic digestion, composting, or land application, estimating 328 pounds per person a year in 2016.⁶ The goal would be to reduce this to 164 pounds per person by 2030. While food loss (occurring during production up to the retail levels) lacks a baseline now. Meals on Wheels has implemented innovative programs in Illinois, such as reusable trays, pre-planning to limit overproduction, and timely deliveries to maintain food quality, which indirectly reducing waste.⁴

Purpose

To demonstrate Meals on Wheels' commitment on mitigating food waste by conducting a food waste audit at the Park Towers, following the "Student Guidelines for Food Waste Audit."

Objectives

- Conduct a food waste audit at Park Towers during the Wednesday C1 meal service.
- Collect and analyze food waste data, identify reasons for waste, develop an After-Action Report (AAR) to reduce waste across Will County sites that serve C1 meals.
- Produce an executive summary with data and images in an appendix.
- Develop a presentation for Director of Operations and Chief Executive Officer to share findings and recommendations.

Preparation of Audit

Meals on Wheels, operated by Community Nutrition Network & Senior Services Association, delivers meals to homebound seniors and individuals with disabilities and runs Cafes at sites but for this audit it was at Park Towers (1247 Caterpillar Dr. Joliet, IL 60436). Park Towers C1, overseen by Jennifer Delarosa, ensure daily deliveries every day and efficient café operations every weekday. This audit on the Café's C1 meal service is to quantify and analyze food waste, aiming to enhance their reduction techniques and strategies to run the program more efficiently. The audit, scheduled for Wednesday June 10th, 2025, from 11:00am to 12:00pm, aligns with their regular café hours. On June 6th, 2025, Charmiane Conley assigned Corey

Gustafik (myself) to operate and conduct the audit, with Charmaine Conley assisting in gathering supplies and working the logistics.

Audit Process

The audit follows the Guide to Conducting Student Food Waste Audits, adapted for the café's senior congregate setting. Food waste will be collected from trays and the clients will be surveyed, with simplified questions to accommodate any potential cognitive or language barriers. All clients were fluent in English, so surveys will be offered in English only.

Equipment and Supplies

- Regular scale for weighing food waste.
- Buckets for collecting food.
- Disposable gloves and cleaning supplies.
- Clipboard, pens, and data collection forms.
- Labels sheets for each bin.

All equipment will be set up at the Park Towers at 10:30am on June 10th, 2025.

Staffing and Roles

- Food Collection: Corey Gustafik will collect trays and note immediate client feedback (e.g., reasons for uneaten food).
- Survey: Corey Gustafik will administer brief surveys on meal satisfaction and reasons for waste, adapted to clients' needs.
- Weighing: Corey Gustafik will weigh and record waste data, compiling survey responses and calculating metrics.

- Cleaning and Disposal: Corey Gustafik will manage waste disposal and sanitation to maintain hygiene for equipment and the site.

Procedure

- Setup (10:30am): Arrange scale, bin, and forms: brief site manager, staff, and clients about SOP.
- Meals and Data Collection (11:00am-12:30pm): serve meals, collect food waste, administer surveys (noting reason for waste), collect food leftovers.
- Waste Management: 11:30am-12:30pm): sort and weigh food waste and leftovers, record data and maintain sanitation.
- Data compilation: Summarize waste data and analyze survey responses to identify patterns.
- Clean up: dispose of waste, sanitize equipment, and store supplies.

Considerations

- Client need: Seniors may have cognitive or physical limitations, requiring clear, respectful communications, simple questions, and food waste returns.
- Logistics: Limited time at Park Towers, which means Corey Gustafik had to be efficient with data collection and avoid disrupting the normal operations.
- Data accuracy: Scales will be calibrated, and food will be weighed and placed in proper bucket.

Goals

- Quantify the amount and types of food waste and left over from Café.
- Identify reasons for uneaten food.

- Provide recommendations to Meals on Wheels, such as adjusting portion sizes, modifying menus or enhance orders.

Overview of Audit Information

- Location: Park Towers 247 Caterpillar Dr. Joliet IL 60436
- Numbers of Clients Approximately 15-20 café participants
- Date: June 10th, 2025
- Meal Service: Wednesday C1 meal (lunch, 11:00am-12:00pm)
- Menu:
- Staff: Corey Gustafik (Audit Manager), Jennifer Delarosa (site Manager), Charmaine Conely (Corey's Preceptor)

Data Collection:

Data will be collected onsite by assigned participants. The following tables summarize meal service, equipment weights, food weights and percentages and survey results:

Table1:

meal Service- Menu Description (11:00am-12:00pm)

Food Item	Presentation Format
Italian Sausage w/ Marinara sauce	Pan
Whole wheat bun	Pan
Bean Soup	Pan

Tossed Garden Salad	Pan
Cottage cheese	Pan served in container
Diced melon	Pan, packaged in container
Pasta Salad	

Table 2:*weight of equipment*

<i>Weight of pans and buckets</i>
<i>Bucket 1= 0.88lbs</i>
<i>Bucket 2=0.72 lbs.</i>

Table 3:*Weight and units of food received.*

<i>Meal Service</i>	<i>Food Items</i>	<i>Presentation Format</i>	<i>Total Weight or Units</i>
<i>Lunch 11:00am- 12:00pm</i>	<i>Italian sausage w/ marinara sauce</i>	<i>Pan</i>	<i>13.06</i>
	<i>Whole wheat bun</i>	<i>Pan</i>	<i>3.64</i>
	<i>Bean soup</i>	<i>Pan</i>	<i>16.62</i>

	<i>Tossed garden salad</i>	<i>Pan</i>	9.04
	<i>Cottage cheese</i>	<i>Pan</i>	5.76
	<i>Diced melon</i>	<i>Container within Pan</i>	6.94
	<i>Pasta salad</i>	<i>Pan</i>	10.82

Table 4:*Client Survey*

Table 5:*food items for recycling or reuse*

Item	End Weight	Reasoning	Food wasted Weight	Food Waste %
Bucket #1	6.36	Leftovers		9%
Bucket #2	8.40	Food waste		12%

Table 6:*Total from entire waste study*

Park Tower Menu	Weight	Leftover Weight	thrown away waste	Seconds Weight	Weight of Pan w/o food	percentage of waste
Italian Sausage w/ marinara sauce	13.06	5.16	2.2	2.96	1.46	33%
Whole Wheat bun	3.64	1.04	0.78	0.26	28 ea. .13	11%
Bean Soup	16.62	3.74	0	3.74	3.12 and 13.22	0%
Salad	9.04	1.82	0.75	1.07	3.3	11%
Cottage Cheese	5.76	0.14	0.32	0.18	1.54	4%
Melon	6.94	1.34	0	1.34	5.12	0%
Pasta Salad	10.82	4.36	2.6	1.76	1.3	39%

*Table 7:**Total stats from food audit*

total food weight=65.88
total leftover weight=17.6
thrown away weight=6.65
seconds weight =11.31
total waste=11.65
% of food wasted=18%
Total price of menu=194.76
Cost of waste=35.07

Table 8: cost of food and waste

Park Tower Menu	cost	waste cost
Italian Sausage w/ marinara sauce	38.66	6.51
Whole Wheat bun	10.77	2.31
Bean Soup	49.19	0
Salad	26.76	2.22
Cottage Cheese	17.05	0.95
Melon	20.54	0
Pasta Salad	32.03	7.7

Note: individual packaged items (e.g., milk cartons, water) will not be counted because the site itself supplied these resources.

Results and Data Analysis

Initial food weight will be treated as 100%, with wasted food weighed and calculated as a percentage. Survey responses will be analyzed to identify patterns and data will be represented in tables and charts to highlight total waste and key contributors.

Recommendations

- Implement Pre-ordering: Introduce a more efficient RSVP or pre order system to better estimate the needs and coordinate with food vendor to adjust food sizes.
- Adjust Vendor orders: due to cliental, the melon and the apple that are often served are not adapted to seniors and make it hard to chew. Also, due to sensory degeneration, the clients may not like spicy or Unami flavors and contribute to food waste.
- Adopt Sustainable packaging: Use reusable or recycling container for sauces and individual items to minimize waste and run C1 daily to reuse meals.

Conclusion

The food waste audit at Park Towers with Meals on Wheels commitment to the U.S. 2030 Food Loss and Waste reduction Goal. By following the Student Guidelines for Food Waste Audits, this study provides actionable insights to reduce waste, optimize resources and enhance service sustainability. The site did not have a large amount of food waste on their end, but the food vendor portion sizes contributed to most of the food waste because of the inaccurate sizes of sauces related to food.

References

- 1.EPA. (2025). National Strategy for Reducing Food Loss and Waste and Recycling Organics. <https://www.epa.gov/sustainable-management-food/national-strategy-reducing-food-loss-and-waste-and-recycling-organics>
 - 2.FDA. (2025). Food Loss and Waste. <https://www.fda.gov/food/consumers/food-loss-and-waste>
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 - 4.Meals on Wheels America. (2024). Nutrition Programs and Food Security. <https://www.mealsonwheelsamerica.org/our-programs/nutrition>
 - 5.ReFED. (2021). Roadmap to 2030: Reducing U.S. Food Waste by 50%. <https://www.refed.org/insights/roadmap-to-2030>
 - 6.USDA. (2024). Food Loss and Waste FAQs. <https://www.usda.gov/foodlossandwaste/faqs>
- World Resources Institute. (2016). Food Loss and Waste Accounting and Reporting Standard. <https://www.wri.org/research/food-loss-and-waste-accounting-and-reporting-standard>

Appendix*Table 1: meal Service- Menu Description (11:00am-12:00pm)*

Food Item	Presentation Format
Pasta	Pan
Marinara sauce	Pan
Alfredo sauce	Pan
Chicken	Pan
Italian salad	Pan served in container
Italian dressing	Pan, packaged in container
Fresh fruit	Pan served in container
Garlic Bread	Pan
Whole grain rolls	12 units

Table 2: weight of equipment

<i>Weight of pans and buckets</i>
<i>1 Pan=0.28 lbs.</i>
<i>Bucket 1= 0.88lbs</i>
<i>Bucket 2=0.72 lbs.</i>

Table 3: Weight and units of food received.

<i>Meal Service</i>	<i>Food Items</i>	<i>Presentation Format</i>	<i>Total Weight or Units</i>
<i>Lunch 11:00am- 12:00pm</i>		<i>Pan</i>	
		<i>Pan</i>	
		<i>Pan</i>	
		<i>Pan</i>	
		<i>Pan</i>	
		<i>Container within Pan</i>	
		<i>Pan</i>	
		<i>Individual</i>	

Table 4: Client Survey

[illegible]

Table 5: food items for recycling or reuse

Item	End Weight	Reasoning	Food wasted Weight	Food Waste %
Bucket #1		Leftovers		
Bucket #2		Food waste		

Note: individual packaged items (e.g., milk cartons, water) will not be counted

because the site itself supplied these resources.

Table 6: Initial food weight, leftover weight/ percentage, and food waste weight/ percentage