

Flood the Food Banks: How to Run a Food Drive

More than 49 million adults, kids, and families in the U.S. are experiencing food insecurity (that's 1 in 6 people), an issue that is being exacerbated by the delays, cutbacks, and updates to SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) benefits. People experiencing food insecurity may include members of our own communities, friends and family, or members of our troops, making this a sensitive and important take action issue for Girl Scouts.

Girl Scouts can make a big difference in their communities—and for children around the world—by supporting hunger relief efforts.

**If you or someone you know needs help accessing food, you can look up your nearest food banks and food pantries through Feeding America: [U.S. Hunger Relief Organization](#) | [Feeding America](#).*

Guidance for Conducting a Food Drive

For Girl Scout troops who decide to host their own food drive as part of the Fighting Hunger National Service Project, we have a few suggestions to help you plan.

1. Start a conversation

Consider starting your conversation with questions like:

- What does it feel like to be hungry?
- When you feel hungry, how does it affect your mood, concentration, etc.?
- What might happen to someone physically, emotionally, and mentally if they are hungry for a long time?
- How might hunger affect different areas of life, such as school or work?
- Resource: No Kid Hungry "[Teaching Kids About Hunger](#)"

What causes food insecurity?

- Hunger is caused by the roadblocks that keep too many people from getting the nutritious food we all need to live well, such as:
 - Where we live: Lack of transit, safe places, or good schools can make it harder for some families to get the food they need.
 - Not enough income: Low pay, losing a job, or having a disability can make it hard for even working families to afford enough food.

- High cost of living: When rent, health care, heat and electric bills, and childcare cost more, families often spend less on food.
- Barriers to the future: Discrimination impacts people differently and can create cycles of poverty and hunger that are hard to break.
- Health challenges: Health problems and few care options can lead to hunger. Without the right kind of food, health can get worse.
- Resource: Feeding America “[Hunger in America](#)”

What is the difference between food banks and food pantries?

- Food banks are nonprofit organizations that safely store millions of pounds of food and deliver them to local food programs, like food pantries, kitchens, or shelters. While food banks vary in size, most are very large warehouses. The food they store is donated from food manufacturers, grocery stores, farmers, and growers. In most cases, families facing hunger would not come directly to food banks for help—they would visit a food pantry or food distribution program in their community to get food, groceries, and other support. Many food banks do not accept food collected from food drives, so consider looking for the closest food pantry.
- Food pantries are nonprofit organizations that provide families facing hunger with food and other resources at a specified distribution site. These sites can be located in churches, schools, or other community centers. The food pantry gets a portion of its food from the food bank—but many also solicit food donations from other community partners to ensure that they can meet the needs of families facing hunger. Food pantries typically have specific hours/days of operation and guidelines about the services that they offer.
- Both types of organizations may need food donations! If your local food bank does not accept food collected from food drives, ask whether there is a food pantry in your area that you might work with—or check out [Feeding America’s resource pages](#).

2. Work in collaboration with the food bank or food pantry you will donate to

Where will your troop donate food?

- Have your troop research food pantries and food banks in your community (check out schools and houses of worship). A good resource is [Feeding America’s network](#) of local food banks.

- To research food pantries, you can check out food bank websites and look for agency partners or partner organizations—pantries often receive food to distribute from larger food banks.
- For troops of younger Girl Scouts: consider enlisting the help of a few troop families to gather this information.

Once you have selected a food bank or food pantry you will donate to, it is important to check with them (by phone, website, or email) to find out if they have any specific donation or safety guidelines to follow. It's important to check all details about accepting food donations before your troop starts to collect donations.

For example:

- What foods does your food bank or pantry need most?
- Are there food donation guidelines for you to follow?
- What are the drop-off guidelines? Can an entire troop come, or is space limited?
- When you contact the food bank or food pantry, start by telling them you would like to organize a food drive. Ask to speak to the person who oversees food drives so that you can learn more about their process, needs, and guidelines for donation. You can also ask if they have food drive resources — many organizations may have useful tools already developed to help your troop get started.
- If your troop contacts an organization that is not currently accepting food drive donations, ask if they can point you towards another organization that you could work with.

3. Make a plan – Guiding questions for your troop to answer as you begin planning

When will the food drive begin and end?

- Consider using a 2–3 week window to maximize participation and allow for quick turnaround.
- GSNorCal will be participating in the National Service Project: Fighting Hunger from January 9th, 2026 through late March 2026.

How much food do you hope to donate? What is your troop's goal? You might set a goal to give your community and troop something to work towards.

- If your troop has ten members, for instance, you might set a collection goal of five cans and five boxes per Girl Scout or a troop total of 75 packages of food.

- As a group, determine how each Girl Scout will generate support for the food drive within your community. Who might you ask to contribute to your food drive? How will you reach out to them?
 - Can you send emails or make calls to ask for donations?
 - Is there a local e-newsletter where you can promote the food drive or a neighborhood Facebook page or other social media page or network? Be sure to follow [GS NorCal Social Media Safety Guidelines](#)
 - Will your troop contact local community groups (e.g., houses of worship) or stores to ask for donations or help spread the word?
 - Create a flyer or email template to spread the word! (see end of guide for an example)
 - Make sure the flyer shares instructions for food donations and information on where the food will be donated.

Where will you collect and store the food that is collected (someone's home, a meeting site)?

- Organize an easily accessible collection point for those who contribute to your food drive. Consult with your troop or service unit to determine what would be most appropriate in your area or circumstances.
 - Make sure that you mark this box with clear instructions for food donation (see next step, Step 4, on some Do's and Don'ts of donating food) and that your troop has a plan to safely retrieve the food.
 - You could ask your neighbors to contribute on a certain date/time (for example, on Saturday mornings from 9:00 AM–1:00 PM).
- Drive-thru food drive: If you live in a community where many people have cars, think about setting up a drive-thru food drive.
 - Your friends and family can drive by at one or two designated times to drop off food from their cars.
 - Your troop may also decide to set up a drive-thru food drive at a local grocery store or other location for people to donate food. Get permission beforehand. Inside the store, post a flyer listing what items are most needed. Set up your pickup location outside the store, post signs, and determine how you will staff the pickup.
- How will the food be dropped off to the food bank or food pantry? For example, will each troop member's family take food to the food bank? Will you collect food and transport it? Will you need a van or take multiple trips?

4. Carry out your food drive using all the points that you planned!

Make sure on your flyers and/or food collection boxes, you indicate what foods can and cannot be donated.

- Needs and donation practices can vary by food bank and by community, so before you get started, we suggest contacting your designated food bank or food pantry for their list of preferred donations.
- In general, most food banks accept donations of canned and dry foods. These foods are nonperishable (items that can be kept in your pantry and do not need to be refrigerated) and will not go bad, or may have a sell-by date that is far in the future.
- Some food banks may also collect personal care items like diapers, menstrual products, toothbrushes, soap, etc.
- In general, donate items like:
 - Canned soup
 - Canned fruits
 - Canned vegetables
 - Canned stew
 - Canned protein—tuna, chicken, poultry
 - Beans—canned or dry
 - Peanut butter
 - 100% juice
 - Macaroni & cheese
 - Pasta sauce
 - Grains like:
 - Pasta (most prefer whole grain)
 - Rice (most prefer brown rice)

What food items **not** to collect due to food safety and other concerns:

- Refrigerated or frozen food
 - Some food banks and pantries may have limited freezer or refrigerator space, making it hard to keep things fresh. Because of safety and storage concerns, food that is not shelf-stable cannot be accepted at food drives.
- Food that is expired or close to expiring

- It's important that all food donations are fresh and safe for those who receive them. Food that is close to or past its expiration date may be unsafe for consumption and will not be accepted.
- Homemade food, including leftovers and baked goods
 - To ensure that all food distributed by food banks and pantries is safe for the people who will eat it, organizations aren't able to accept food made in personal kitchens where they can't verify the ingredients or preparation process.
- Food with packaging concerns or fragile packaging
 - This includes items in glass containers or packaging that can break easily, or damaged packaging, including anything partially open and dented or bloated cans. If you wouldn't consider buying the item for your own family, don't donate it.
- Make sure to check all of your donated items to ensure they are appropriate (i.e. expiration dates, sealed properly) before dropping them off at the food bank or food pantry!

5. Thank your food drive participants.

After you have completed your food drive, consider sending a follow-up email or posting on the listservs where you promoted your food drive. A simple thank-you to everyone, letting them know how much food you collected with their help and where you donated the food, would be appreciated!

Also celebrate as a troop for working together, carrying out a plan, and making a difference in your community!

Once your troop has completed their service project, remember to:

- Inspire others to give back. Post a photo of your project to your social networks using the hashtag #GirlScoutsGiveBack. Be sure to tag @gsnorcal too.
- Or you can [share your story](#) with us to be posted on GSNorCal's website, social media, or blog.
- [Complete a survey](#) so your troop's impact can be counted by Girl Scouts USA.
- Recognize your troop's participation with a patch - all Girl Scouts who have hosted a food drive, donated food, or participated in the National Service Project "Flood the Food Banks" are eligible to receive a Flood the Food Banks patch. After your food drive, please fill out this [form](#) to request patches be mailed to your troop!

If you aren't able to give food directly, there are still lots of ways for your troop to make an impact: Support a food drive in your community (either by donating food, money, or time) or organize your own (see guidance below):

1. Designated GSNorCal offices will be food collection sites for individuals, not troops or Service Units. For up to date retail hours [go to this link](#).
 - a. San Jose- 1310 Bascom Ave., San Jose, CA 95128
 - b. Alameda- 1301 Marina Village Pkway #200, Alameda, CA 94501
 - c. Santa Rosa- 4825 Old Redwood Hwy, Santa Rosa, CA 95403
 - d. Eureka- 3202 T St, Eureka, CA 95503
 - e. Chico- 2511 Floral Ave, Chico, CA 95973
 - f. Redding- 1670 Market St. #248, Redding, CA 96001
2. [Write to a Food Bank Hero](#) to show your troop's appreciation and send encouragement for the hard and vital work they do. Mail your handwritten notes to your [local food bank](#).
3. Write letters to your local lawmakers or school officials advocating for programs that address hunger in your community. You can use these [letter templates](#) from Share Our Strength.
4. Reduce the stigma around food insecurity by having open-minded and open-hearted conversations with your troop, family, or friends. You can use Feeding America's Toolkit "[Talk About Hunger](#)" for activities and conversation starters.

If your Girl Scout or troop hosts a food drive, donates food, or participates in the National Service Project "Flood the Food Banks" in an alternate way, they are eligible to receive a Flood the Food Banks patch. After participation, please fill out this [form](#) to request patches be mailed to you!

Conducting a Food Drive Toolkit: Email and Flyer Template

Dear _____,

I'm writing on behalf of my Girl Scout troop/SU, (*Troop/SU #*), and I'm hoping that you can help us provide food to families in our community who are struggling with food insecurity this season. Nationwide, food banks are straining to meet the increased demand for assistance this year because of the delays, cutbacks, and updates to SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program).

I believe providing these food donations is important because [*your own reason*].

Our troop/SU is organizing a food drive [*share a catchy name for your food drive, if you have one*] to support [*FOOD BANK/PANTRY*] this season, which provides food to families and individuals in [*CITY/TOWN*].

I hope that you will help us by contributing some of these suggested food items:

- [*BULLET POINTS TO LIST THE FOODS THE DRIVE IS REQUESTING*]
- [*BULLET POINTS TO LIST THE FOODS THE DRIVE IS REQUESTING*]

IF YOU HAVE SPECIFIC REQUESTS: This season, [*FOOD BANK/PANTRY*] is also looking for donations of [*list items*] to provide to families [*for reason given by food bank/pantry*].

Please keep in mind that [*FOOD BANK/PANTRY*] is not able to accept the following donations:

- Food that needs to be refrigerated
- Food that is expired or close to expiring
- Homemade food, including leftovers and baked goods
- Food with packaging concerns or fragile packaging (like glass)
- [**ANY OTHER REQUESTS FROM YOUR LOCAL FOOD BANK/PANTRY**]

To contribute to our food drive, please [*GIVE INSTRUCTIONS—WHEN, WHERE AND HOW SHOULD THE PERSON CONTRIBUTE?*].

Thank you for considering this request to help our troop/SU and [*food bank/pantry you are donating to*] provide food to families in our own community.

Please let me know if you have any questions.

You may also email [*Email for troop/SU food drive contact, if you have one*] for more information on this food drive.

Sincerely,

[NAME]

[GIRL SCOUT TROOP/SU #]

Girl Scout Troop/SU [#]'s food drive

for [name of local food bank/food pantry]

How we're collecting food:

[instructions for donation – address/collection point times; drive-thru food drive details]

What foods can you donate?

- Fill this in once they have the list of suggested items from the food bank/pantry
- Canned soups
- Canned beans
- Rice (brown)
- [other suggested items]

Please do not donate:

- Food that needs to be refrigerated
- Food that is expired or close to expiring
- Homemade food, including leftovers and baked goods
- Food with packaging concerns or fragile packaging (like glass)
- [any other requests from your local food bank/pantry]

Questions? Contact [troop leader/troop email] for more information.

Want to learn more about Girl Scouts of Northern California?

Go to www.gsnorcal.org.