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What Works

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Frozen Assets

How the North Texas Food Bank's Community Kitchen supplies healthy frozen dinners to the Dallas region's hungry *by Andrea Orr*

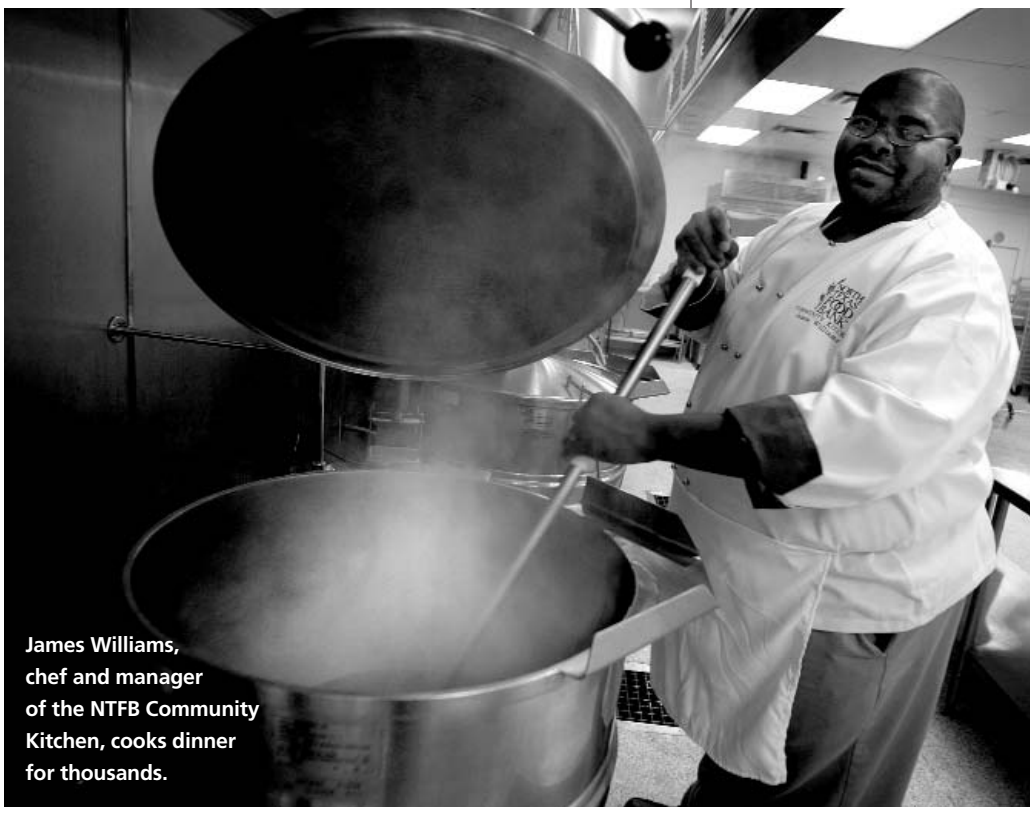
James Williams studied culinary arts in college, but that didn't fully prepare him for his current job. As the chef and manager of the Community Kitchen at the North Texas Food Bank (NTFB), he draws more upon his creativity than upon his recipe collection. That's because his daily challenge is to transform the food bank's random bounty of donated items into thousands of tasty, nutritious frozen meals for over 4,000 people throughout Dallas County.

One day, for example, when there was nothing much to work with except "gobs and gobs of hot dogs" and an odd array of vegetables, Williams fished some soy sauce out of the refrigerator and invented a new Asian-fusion entrée: Weenie Stir-Fry. Community kitchen volunteers apportioned the stir-fry into disposable foil containers of three different sizes (two meals, six meals, or 20 meals), which were then fast-frozen. Over the next few weeks, the food bank shipped the frozen meals to shelters, food pantries, afterschool programs, and other assistance centers around Dallas, which then redistributed them to consumers.

A Better Way to Meet the Need

With their creative approach to meal preparation, Williams and the NTFB Community Kitchen are rewriting the basic rules of how to feed the hungry. Those rules had unofficially dictated that hungry people stand in long lines to be fed "rescue food" – food donated by restaurants and hotels. Because rescue food is close to the end of its shelf life, much of it goes to waste.

When NTFB built its community kitchen in 2002, it aimed to reduce both the waiting-in-line time and the wasted food of traditional soup kitchens. With the help of corporate donors, it first built an expansive state-of-the-art kitchen. Then it took advantage of its existing resources – warehouses, vast stocks of donated food, delivery trucks, and volunteer labor – to design an innovative, vertically integrated system for storing, preparing, and distributing food to the hungry. Today, the kitchen uses the food bank's offerings to produce and distribute frozen meals to agencies, from which people pick them up and take them home.



James Williams, chef and manager of the NTFB Community Kitchen, cooks dinner for thousands.

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF NTFB

"It's home meal replacement for the working poor," explained Paul Wunderlich, chief operating officer for NTFB. "When people with more income pick up a frozen lasagna from the grocery and feed it to their families, they are basically paying someone else to cook for them. The working poor can't afford this. And so, for example, the family of an exhausted single mother with two jobs and a bus commute

The community kitchen transforms food bank stores into healthy frozen dinners.

may get chips and soda for dinner, instead of a nutritionally complete meal.

"We want our frozen meals to be no different than the retail product," Wunderlich continued. He also noted that picking up and taking home a frozen meal, rather than eating rescue food in a soup kitchen, "gives people a bit of dignity."

The NTFB Community Kitchen's frozen meals are finding a steadily growing market. Since NTFB opened its doors in 1982, hunger has gone from an affliction of the poorest and most transient in Dallas County to a chronic problem plaguing plenty of working families living in middle-class homes.

This change reflects national trends, noted Ertharin Cousin, chief operating officer of America's Second Harvest, the largest hunger-relief program in the United States. Cousin said that hunger is growing among the working poor largely because wages have not kept up with living expenses. Today, Cousin observed, it is not unusual to see entire families lined up for a meal at a soup kitchen. In fact, one in four people who visit a soup kitchen is a child.

A Variety of Dividends

Although NTFB must still stretch its dollars to meet the growing hunger problem, the community kitchen is already paying off. Its high-volume cooking equipment, its ability to freeze ingredients and meals, and its vertical integration of storage, production, and distribution enable the community kitchen to produce massive amounts of food on a shoestring. "We are very efficient on cost per meal," said Wunderlich. Each meal typically costs the kitchen from 75 cents to a dollar to produce and distribute to agencies. These agencies cover some of the production costs by contributing 40 cents per pound of food. Corporate and individual donors cover the rest of the community kitchen's costs.

The community kitchen also enjoys psychological dividends. Because it provides frozen meals, rather than rescue food on the brink of expiration, the community kitchen's stress levels are uncharacteristically low. To stay ahead of the demand curve, Williams keeps three weeks worth of meals in the freezer.

Another feature that keeps the NTFB Community Kitchen's costs down is its workforce. The kitchen has but one salaried employee, Williams, who oversees the production of all 1,600 meals per day. He is assisted by female inmates from nearby Dawson State Prison. This keeps labor expenses down, and also provides valuable training to the inmates.

Melanie Gorrell is one former inmate who applied her training at the NTFB Community Kitchen toward a career. Gorrell was serving a 16-month prison sentence for embezzling from her former employer when she signed up to work in the community kitchen. "It did me a lot of good to get out, rather than sitting around and watching TV and sleeping," she says. Today, the 43-year-old Gorrell is happily employed as a cook at a fraternity house at Southern Methodist University. She considers the training she had in prison a real blessing, because her crime had pretty much barred her from going back into the data entry field, where she'd earned a living for the previous 17 years. "That was an excellent program, because it helps you get away from other inmates and feel like you are free," she says.

"We are not just about food in and food out. We are educating the entire community about hunger."

To Jan Pruitt, North Texas Food Bank's chief executive, these educational and training programs are a key part of the community kitchen's mission. "We are not just about food in and food out," said Pruitt. "We are about educating the entire community about hunger." □

