



**Name of Project:** Thanksgiving Food Drive

**Chapter Submitted:** Blooming Prairie / Jen Grovdahl

**Programming Area:** Community Connections

**Type of Project:** Service

**Project Goal:** Thanksgiving is a time when food insecurity feels especially acute—grocery costs spike, and cultural expectations around a “proper” holiday meal add emotional stress. As many as 1 in 4 families they serve skip turkey entirely due to cost (a single bird can exceed a week’s food budget). We organized this targeted drive to remove that barrier, preserve dignity, and let every referred family host their own Thanksgiving table.

**Planning Steps:**

- \*\*Decide how many families you'd like to provide a box\*\*
- \*\*Decide when and how you want to distribute the boxes\*\*
- \*\*Market the Event\*\*
- \*\* Decide What Goes Inside Each Box (and How Much)\*\*
- \*\*Request Donations – Smart, Early, and Creative\*\*
- \*\*Collect & Store Donations\*\*
- \*\* Purchase any items you are missing to complete all the boxes\*\*
- \*\*Assemble the boxes of shelf-stable items and store until distribution\*\*
- \*\*Hand out/deliver the boxes\*\*
- \*\*Send thank you cards to everyone who donated\*\*

**Project Details:** **\*\*Decide how many families you'd like to provide a box to and any qualifications you want to use\*\***

We settled on **200 boxes** after noticing that a nearby town with roughly 25% our population successfully gave away 50 boxes. That simple ratio felt realistic and achievable for our first year.

Talk to other communities that have done this—you’ll be amazed at how openly they share their numbers and lessons learned. Most want to see you succeed.

On eligibility:

- We chose **no income verification** - keeping the process simple, dignified, and fast.
- We originally planned to limit boxes to our town residents only, but in the end, we dropped even that requirement and didn't ask for proof of residency.

Result: anyone who needed a box and showed up (or signed up) could receive one, no questions asked. Removing barriers made the event feel truly welcoming and community-wide.

### **\*\*Decide when and how you want to distribute the boxes\*\***

We modeled our distribution after Hormel's "Hometown Turkey Takeover," which used a simple no-signup drive-through format. To avoid the long lines and shortages Hormel encountered, we started small and controlled:

- Launched exclusively for residents of our own town and required advance sign-up. → This let us accurately gauge demand and plan accordingly.
- Sign-ups were lower than expected, so we gradually expanded eligibility to neighboring communities.
- In the end, we offered the best of both worlds: → Anyone who signed up was guaranteed a box. → We also kept a no-signup drive-through lane open on the day of the event; if extra boxes remained after fulfilling guaranteed reservations, drive-through guests received one (first-come, first-served).

This hybrid approach prevented traffic chaos and shortages while maintaining the event's welcoming, accessible nature for the broader community.

### **\*\* Decide What Goes Inside Each Box (and How Much)\*\***

Keep the box generous but realistic—aim for a complete holiday meal for a family of 4–6 with minimal cooking required.

Here's what we packed in each of our 200 boxes (adjust quantities to your family size or budget):

- 1 large turkey breast (5–7 lbs) OR a fully cooked spiral ham (6–8 lbs)
- 4 cans of vegetables
- 1 box stuffing mix stuffing
- 1 can cranberry sauce
- 1 box cornbread mix
- 2 packets instant mashed potatoes (or 1 large box)

- 2 jars/packets gravy

What we hope to add next year:

- 1 dozen dinner rolls (fresh or frozen)
- 1 boxed cake, brownie, or pumpkin pie mix + required ingredients (eggs, oil, canned pumpkin, etc.)
- 1 box gelatin or pudding mix for an easy no-bake dessert
- Bonus feel-good items (if budget allows): small jar of olives, marshmallows, apple juice, or hot cocoa packets

Pro tip: Print a simple “Holiday Meal Menu” sheet, including recipes, and tuck it in every box so families know exactly how everything comes together. It turns a collection of groceries into a real celebration.

### **\*\*Request Donations – Smart, Early, and Creative\*\***

Start **3–4 months** out (even earlier for national chains like Walmart, Kroger, Aldi, Target, Food Lion). Their corporate approval process is slow — the sooner you ask, the more likely you are to get a “yes.”

#### **How to Ask**

Always open with the magic question: “**What is the easiest way for you to approve a donation request?**” Then do exactly that.

1. **In-person visit** to the store/restaurant manager with your one-page flyer/letter → highest approval rate by far.
2. **Phone call** to the manager (follow up in person if you can).
3. **Online corporate donation portal** — submit 3–4 months early.
4. **Email** with the flyer/letter as a clean PDF.

#### **For Local Businesses (they get asked a lot — stand out by being creative)**

Don’t always ask for cash or product. Offer easy, feel-good options:

- **Customer “Buy One to Donate” baskets** at checkouts (wish-list items go straight into the basket). → Our grocery store saw shoppers donate ~\$500 in goods... then the store quietly matched it dollar-for-dollar without us even asking. We spent every donated dollar we got from other sources right back in their registers to fill gaps — win/win/win.

- Day-old dinner rolls or pies from bakeries and restaurants.
- Overstock or close-dated canned goods from warehouses/distributors.
- Cases of juice, soda, or water from beverage companies.

### **The Follow-Up That Turns One-Time Donors Into Annual Sponsors**

- Immediately after approval: short handwritten thank-you note + invitation to swing by distribution day for photos.
- Within a week after the event: another handwritten card with a candid photo and the line “Because of you, 200 local families had a full Thanksgiving table.”

Do this part right — early, politely, creatively, and gratefully — and your boxes will be fully stocked, your budget will stay tiny, and you’ll have sponsors calling you next July asking, “When do we start again?”

### **\*\*Collect & Store Donations\*\***

Frozen turkeys, hams, rolls, and any butter or perishables add up fast. One overlooked detail can leave you with nowhere to put hundreds of pounds of food the day before distribution.

Key lessons we learned the hard way:

- **Assume every freezer or fridge has only 50–60% of its listed capacity available.** People forget they already have ice cubes, deer meat, or last year’s leftovers taking up space.
- Make a simple spreadsheet: Column 1: Location (church, school, fire station, personal home, etc.) Column 2: Promised freezer/fridge space (in cubic feet) Column 3: Safe usable space (multiply by 0.5–0.6) Column 4: What you actually assign to it
- Line up **backup locations** early — restaurants, florists, beverage distributors, and schools often have walk-in coolers they’ll let you use for a few days if you ask nicely.
- Pick up turkeys and hams as **late as possible** (ideally 48–72 hours before giveaway). Most suppliers will hold them frozen for you until the last minute.
- Have a **contingency plan**: Ask for more space than you need, in case something fails or holds way less than anticipated.

Bottom line: Treat cold storage like venue space — once it’s full, you’re out of luck. Build in a big safety margin from day one.

## **\*\* Purchase any items you are missing to complete all the boxes\*\***

Once donations are in and sorted, you'll almost certainly have gaps. Budget for this from the beginning—it's normal and expected.

How we handled the final shopping efficiently:

1. **One week before pickup day**, inventory every donated item and compare against your master box list (e.g., "Need 47 more cranberry sauces, 112 more stuffing boxes...").
2. **Shop with a detailed list and a dedicated team** (3–4 people with carts).  
→ Go early in the morning or late at night to avoid crowds. → Bring printed lists and calculators—phone batteries die.
3. **Buy in bulk where it saves money:**
  - Warehouse clubs (Sam's/Costco for canned goods, gravy packets, cake mixes, and rolls.
  - Restaurant supply stores for giant cans of veggies or gravy bases.
  - Grocery outlet/discount stores for close-dated but perfectly good items.
  - Coordinate with a local store to buy by the case and negotiate a discount, as they will not have to carry anything on their shelf.
4. **Keep every receipt** and immediately reimburse volunteers who used personal cards or cash.
5. **Over-buy slightly on non-perishables** (10–15 extra of each canned/dry item). Leftover cans become the seed stock for next year or go to the local food pantry.
6. **Last-minute perishables** (turkeys, hams, rolls) are purchased or picked up 24–72 hours before distribution so they stay perfectly fresh.

Doing the "gap fill" shopping in one focused trip prevents the chaos of running back and forth—and ensures every single box leaves looking full and identical.

## **\*\*Assemble the boxes of shelf-stable items and store until distribution\*\***

Do this step 1–2 weeks before distribution day. It's the single biggest stress-reducer of the entire project.

Here's the system that worked perfectly for our 200 bags (you could use boxes):

1. **Set up an assembly line** (8–10 volunteers, 1 hour max. Tables in a U-shape:

- Station 1: empty box or bag
  - Station 2–6: one person per major item (veggies, stuffing, potatoes, gravy, cranberry, dessert, etc.)
  - Station 7: quick visual check for completeness
  - Station 8: close and tape box, or tie the bag. If in bags, store in bigger totes for easy stacking. Label how many are in each tote or number the boxes.
2. **Make every box/bag identical**—no “this one got brownies, that one got cake.” Uniformity feels fair and professional.
3. **Stack and store**
- Numbered boxes or totes make it easy to spot if any are missing later.
  - Store in a cool, dry, secure space (church basement, school gym, empty garage, enclosed trailer).

Once the shelf-stable boxes are done, the only thing left on distribution week is adding the cold items and handing them out. You’ll sleep much better knowing 95% of the work is already finished.

### **\*\*Hand out/deliver the boxes\*\***

For our size chapter, a **drive-through event** was the clear winner — we simply didn’t have the volunteers to deliver 200 boxes door-to-door.

How we ran a smooth, cheerful drive-through:

- Held it on the Sunday before Thanksgiving (1 PM – 5 PM). We plan to shorten this next year, so we aren’t competing with sunset.
- Location: local servicemen's club parking lot with two driveways, one labeled with a big sign as enter, the other as exit only.
- Layout (4 volunteers total): → Station 1: Greeters checked names against the sign-up list (guaranteed boxes) and directed to station 2, drive-ups were directed to station 4 → Station 2: Preregistered boxes were handed out from there. Station 3: Drive-up (non-registered) was handed out from there.

The whole process took most cars under 90 seconds. Everyone stayed warm, safe, and smiling.

If your group is larger or prefers delivery, partner with another organization (Scouts, youth groups, church teams) and turn it into a fun day of service.

## **\*\*Send thank you cards to everyone who donated\*\***

This is the step that turns one-time donors into repeat champions.

Do it like this:

- **Deadline:** Mail or deliver within 7–10 days after distribution. The sooner, the more impactful.
- **Personal & handwritten** — no generic letters. A real signature and one personal sentence make all the difference.
- **Include a photo:** Print a cheerful group shot from distribution day (smiling volunteers loading boxes, families waving, etc.). It shows the donor exactly what their gift accomplished.
- **Sample short message** (fits easily on a notecard):

Dear [Business or Name], Because of your generous donation, 200 local families sat down to a full Thanksgiving meal this year. We are so grateful for your partnership and can't wait to work with you again. With gratitude, [Your name & organization]

- **For major donors:** Add one handwritten line referencing their specific gift ("Your 75 turkeys put smiles on so many faces!").
- **Even small donors get one:** The shopper who bought two cans of cranberries, the kid who donated \$5 from their piggy bank — everyone gets a card.

Never underestimate the power of a simple, timely "thank you." It's the best fundraising tool you'll ever have.

## **Project Success:**

- **\*\*Impact Achieved\*\*:** 100% of boxes delivered on time the Sunday before Thanksgiving. Each box fed a family of 3–4 (up to families of 9 for those who preregistered) for the holiday.

- **\*\*Donor Response\*\*:** Raised approximately \$7200 in donations, including 204 turkey breasts (retail value ~\$3,600) paired with canned vegetables, approximately \$500 in donations from individuals through the local store, plus \$500 matched by the grocery store, \$168 in donations from a food shelf in Steele County, \$400 in oatmeal donated from a manufacturer and almost \$300 in donations from local individuals and families that were made through other stores or cash.

- **\*\*Efficiency\*\*:** Streamlined packing assembly line—16 volunteers packed all 200 boxes in under 1 hour. Drive-through pickup minimized contact and maximized safety.

- **\*\*Community Buzz\*\*:** Local newspaper ran an article after the fact.

-\*\*We are already set up for success for next year\*\* - Hormel has already committed to the same number of turkey breasts next year. The local store has also committed to helping again next year.

## Ways to Promote: **\*\*Market the Event \*\***

Start promoting the boxes 6 weeks out and requesting donations 3–4 months out. Clear, repeated, shame-free messaging is everything — the families who need this most often hear about it last if you don't flood every channel.

### 1. Create One Sharp, Shareable Graphic (Canva = free and fast)

Include on a single page or image:

- “FREE Complete Thanksgiving Meal for Your Family.”
- “No income check, no residency proof — just come!”
- Date, time, location (with tiny map)
- Two ways to get a box: → Sign up for a guaranteed box: (we used a Google form tied to our chapter Gmail account) → Or drive through the day of (while supplies last)
- Organization logo + contact phone/email

This one flyer/image becomes the heart of every promotion and every donation request.

### 2. Promote the Boxes – Free or Almost-Free Channels That Delivered Huge Results

- Schools – Ask elementary, middle, and high schools to email the flyer to every family and send a paper copy home in backpacks.
- Churches & food pantries – Personally email/text pastors and pantry directors; ask for pulpit announcements, bulletin inserts, and forwarding to members.
- Flyers everywhere real people go – Grocery stores, dollar stores, gas stations, laundromats, convenience stores, restaurants, libraries, post offices, doctor offices, barber shops, community centers, chamber bulletin boards.
- Facebook & Nextdoor – Post the graphic in every local group; boost the main post for \$20–\$50, targeting your county
- Free radio, newspaper, TV community calendars – Call and ask; most run PSAs at no cost.
- Unexpected winners – Utility-bill inserts, electronic marquees (banks, pharmacies, city hall), craft fairs, farmers markets, fall festivals.

Post weekly countdowns the last three weeks (“Only 75 guaranteed spots left!” → “25 left!” → “Last day!”). The morning of the event, post again: “We still have boxes — drive through 10 AM–1 PM!”

## **Key Takeaways: Suggestions for Improvement:**

### **Finding the Right Families (Especially the Ones Who Won't Ask)**

The biggest lesson from year one: the families who need this the most are often the least likely to sign up publicly. Pride, stigma, work schedules, no transportation, or simply not seeing the posts all get in the way. Here's what we're changing for next year :

#### **1. Shift to a Hybrid "Trusted Nominators" Model (keeps it mostly anonymous)**

- Keep a small public sign-up link open for anyone comfortable using it (covers the families who see your flyers and want to self-register).
- Add a second, even simpler form called "**Nominate a Family in Need**" (takes 30 seconds): "Know a family that could use a full Thanksgiving meal? Tell us how many people are in the home and a safe way to contact them (or just say 'deliver anonymously'). No names required." → Share this version with local teachers, school social workers, pastors, food-pantry staff, nurses, postal carriers, hair stylists — anyone who quietly knows who's struggling.

#### **2. Partner Early and Deeply with the Real Experts**

Reach out in July/August to:

- School counselors & Backpack Program coordinators
- Food pantries & Semcac/Salvation Army
- Pastors and church outreach teams
- Public health nurses and WIC offices Ask: "If we provide 200 complete Thanksgiving boxes again next year, can we work together so the families you already serve get first priority?" Most will happily handle nominations or even delivery for their clients — zero public exposure for the family.

#### **3. Offer True No-Questions Options**

- Anonymous porch drop-offs for nominated families (cooler on the porch with a "Happy Thanksgiving from your community" card — no name on either side).
- After-hours or next-day pickup at a member's house for people who work during distribution.
- Partner with one or two churches or nonprofits to run satellite pickups or deliveries the same weekend.

#### **4. Keep a Managed Waitlist from Day One**

Google Form with: Name (optional), phone/email, family size, "OK with delivery or pickup from private home if we run short on the main day?" This gives you an accurate count early while still allowing anonymous nominations.

## 5. Change the Messaging to Remove Shame

Instead of “Free Thanksgiving boxes — sign up here,” try: **“2nd Annual Community Thanksgiving Share – 200 local families will receive a complete holiday meal. Want one or know someone who does? Text THANKSGIVING to 507-XXX-XXXX or visit the link.”** The word “Share” and the idea that “200 families will receive” feels like belonging to something positive, not charity.

## 6. Use the “Snowball” Method Next Year

Year-one recipients inevitably know other families in similar situations. In the box next year, include a small card: “Enjoyed your meal? Help us reach another family next year — text NOMINATE to 507-XXX-XXXX (names kept private).”

With this loop, the project almost markets itself by year three.

Do these six things and you’ll move from “we scrambled to fill 200 sign-ups” to “we had 350 quiet nominations and had to cap it.” The food finds the people who truly need it — without forcing anyone to stand in a public line or fill out a form in front of their neighbors.

## Key Takeaways – What We Wish We’d Known Before Day One

(Real talk from a team that started way too late and still pulled it off — learn from our chaos!)

- Start EARLY — 4–6 months, not 4–6 weeks

Corporate donations (and even some local donations) can take 90+ days. Starting late forced us to pick up turkeys ourselves and spend \$1,000+ out of pocket to balance boxes. Next year, we’re locked in for turkey delivery and have corporate requests submitted by July.

- Turkey logistics will make or break you

Pickup day was a circus — the truck arrived while families were already lining up, volunteers hadn’t shown yet, and random distribution drivers ended up loading everything. Secure delivery straight to your site and have one person own that relationship from day one.

- Cold & dry storage — line it up early

We leaned hard on members’ personal freezers, garages, and an enclosed trailer. It worked, but it was stressful. Partner with a church, school, restaurant, or business that has walk-ins and secure dry space. Ask in the summer when no one else is competing for it.

- Some families can’t come to you

Work, no car, disability, or pride — we had several who couldn’t make drive-through hours. Next year, we’ll identify those households (with help from pantries and churches) and arrange a small delivery team or partner drop-offs.

- Build a waitlist from the beginning

We ran out of guaranteed boxes fast and had no system for extras. A simple Google Form waitlist lets you call people the morning of to fill in for no-shows or extras.

- Donation randomness = big surprise expenses

We got 150 cans of green beans and only 12 boxes of stuffing. Budget \$4–\$6 per box for “gap filling,” and buy those items the week before, once you see what’s actually in-house.

- Food pantries & churches are your secret weapon

Once we linked arms with them, everything got easier — they suggested recipients we’d never have found, arranged a few deliveries, and gave priceless advice. Bring them in on day one.

- Never underestimate your network

One member’s friend knew the exact person at Hormel — that single phone call unlocked everything. That same friend connected us to a second major donor. Tell everyone what you’re doing; the right introduction is often one degree away.

Bottom line: This project is 100% doable, incredibly rewarding, and grows every year — but only if you give yourself the gift of time and partnerships. Start in July, lock in storage and delivery early, lean on pantries/churches, and you’ll run a smooth, joyful event instead of a heroic scramble.