

# Food Safety in Community Free Fridges

Community fridges, also called “free fridges”, are community-led food pantries that provide 24/7 access to donated food in support of hunger relief and food security. Unlike traditional food pantries, these grassroots-led fridge spaces are often run by volunteers and supplied directly by community members in the neighborhoods they are housed in.

A typical free fridge donation space has one or two protected and covered refrigerators. They are sometimes accompanied with dry pantry shelving for donation of dried goods, non-perishables, and other non-food items like toiletries, diapers, or clothes. Because free fridges are usually located outdoors, open to the public, and exposed to extreme temperatures, they may have potential food safety risks. The FDA Food Code does not provide specific guidance for community-led hunger distribution food sharing; therefore, free fridges can still be subject to health inspectors.<sup>1</sup>

However, accessibility does not have to compromise safety! This condensed guide is intended to assist any organizers, volunteers, or community members looking to make improvements in their local free fridge environment that optimize food safety while supporting community food security. The inspiration for this resource comes from the organized efforts of ATX Free Fridge in Austin, Texas and the robust network of community-led food distribution they’ve grown since 2020.

## Food Safety Best Practices

When providing options of what to donate to the free fridge, things like prepared meals or packaged fresh produce are ideal choices. Many free fridge organizers around the U.S. have encouraged a “Cook for Consumption Model” from community members where donations are specifically cooked, portioned, and labeled for the free fridge. For bulk, excess, and unopened packaging, there are best practices that can improve the quality and integrity of the fridge space. Below are a few suggestions to keep the free fridge food-safe for all who visit.

- Food must be securely packaged and labeled
- Any food not in its original packaging should be labeled.
- When handling food or cooking to donate food, its encouraged to wear gloves and face masks.
- Have a thermometer in the fridge and keep perishable food below 40°F.
- Make sure donated items are placed inside the fridge and not left on the ground outside. Food items on the ground are vulnerable to pests, unsafe temperatures, and germs.

### Condition and Labelling Suggestions

Prepared foods or home-cooked meals should be labeled with the following:

- The name of the dish
- The date it was made
- All ingredients and potential allergens.<sup>2</sup>

## Tips for the Fridge Space

- Leave masking tape and sharpies for labeling – this can be helpful for produce or last-minute donations
- Display clear food safety signage and donation guidelines around the free fridge.
- Offer multilingual and translated signage to accommodate the community you’re serving
- Provide a suggestion box for community feedback.<sup>3</sup>
- Leave a QR code, link, or contact number if people need to report an incident with the free fridge space.



*Note: It's especially important to clearly label common allergens in donated items, which include but are not limited to soy, wheat, dairy, egg, gluten, sesame, and shellfish.*

1 U.S. Food and Drug Administration, FDA Food Code 2022, § 3-204.10, (December 28, 2022), <https://www.fda.gov/media/164194/download>.

2 U.S. Food and Drug Administration. “Food Allergies: What You Need to Know.” <https://www.fda.gov/food/buy-store-serve-safe-food/food-allergies-what-you-need-know>

3 Fridge guests and neighborhoods accessing free fridges should have a say in the type of food they are receiving. Donations don’t negate having the option of preference

## Risks and Donations to Avoid

- **Raw meat, shellfish, or unpasteurized/ raw dairy:** the food safety risk is often higher with these foods and can create cross-contamination
- **Frozen foods.** Unless the fridge has a dedicated freezer, frozen foods can thaw and leak inside refrigerators, creating possible spills and cross contamination.
- **Home-canned goods (like jams, sauces)** <sup>4</sup> due to botulism risk. Only accept canned food that has been produced on a manufacturing chain.
- **No leftovers,** catering trays, meal scraps, opened or unsealed food that has already been touched/eaten by others.
- **Rotting, spoiled, moldy, or damaged produce**
- **Food items exceeding their labeled “best by” or expiration date.** <sup>5</sup> Note: baby food and baby formula should never be used past their expiration dates.
- **Damaged, opened, or tampered packaged food.** Packaged donations should remain unopened and with their original label in tact.
- **Glass or open containers.** Items without a lid can lead to spills. Broken glass is a safety hazard.

## Common risks

- Power outages that cause the temperature to rise above 40°F
- Vandalism and theft to the space or the fridge
- Excess trash, boxes, or food not placed inside the fridge
- Food spills and cross contamination from improperly donated food items (ex: raw meat, frozen foods that have thawed and leaked)
- Leaks, rain, and flooding
- Animals and pests
- Excess heat or direct sun affecting fridge functionality



West Campus free fridge in Austin, Texas. Organized by ATX Free Fridge.

## Fridge Maintenance & Community Use

### Cleaning and Monitoring

- Make sure the fridge is visited for maintenance at least once a week.
- Keep cleaning logs, temperature logs, and incident reports onsite – paper based or digital. QR codes can link to digital forms.
- Use a digital temperature gauge; there are some wireless monitoring systems that can alert you when temperatures exceed safe limits.
- Keep internal fridge temperatures at or below 40°F.
- Ensure fridge doors remain closed: Door bungees or self-closing mechanisms can help prevent temperature fluctuations from open doors.
- Routinely inspect fridge seals, thermometer accuracy and refrigerants for efficiency.



### Fridge placement and Housing

- Pick a host site where the fridge will be visible and used often by the neighborhood.
- Create a sturdy outer shelter and roofing around the fridge to protect it from the elements and fire hazards (rain, sun, or flooding)
- Keep the fridge away from direct sun and anything that could cause excessive heat
- Ensure proper ventilation behind and underneath the fridge.
- Consider a dry pantry shelf for non-perishable items, elevated off the ground and protected from pests.
- Beautify the surrounding fridge space with local art to encourage dignity and use. This can also discourage vandalism.

<sup>4</sup> Any deviation from the USDA-endorsed methods of canning presents a risk of botulism. USDA. “Shelf-Stable Food.” Last modified October 19, 2023. <https://www.fsis.usda.gov/food-safety/safe-food-handling-and-preparation/food-safety-basics/shelf-stable-food>.

<sup>5</sup> Depending on how much traffic the free fridge gets, it may take a while for the donated food to actually get used by enough consumers before it expires or becomes unsafe to eat. Kansas State University Research and Extension, Food Product Dating: What Do Those Dates Mean?, MF3204 (2015), <http://www.bookstore.ksre.ksu.edu/pubs/MF3204.pdf>.





Example of cooking kits via FREE LUNCH in Austin, TX (@f\_r\_e\_e\_lunch) Cooking kits have bagged, pre-portioned ingredients paired with recipe instructions.

Not all fridges are built equally. Depending on the type of fridge the site hosts, there may be some varying considerations for care, cleaning, and maintenance. Commercial and single door fridges are ideal donation fridges because they are equipped with things like self closing doors, ample storage room, and no freezer space. They usually have digital temperature gauges and settings that make it easier to control and manipulate consistency inside the fridge. These types of fridges might be more expensive to fix. Two-door, top-bottom, configurations with a freezer (like a fridge you might see in your house) are great solutions for free fridge spaces who are just starting out, or for neighborhoods that have low-volume traffic and donations. Not all free fridges have available frozen space, therefore, organizers should be clear guidelines about what a particular site can or cannot accept for donations.

If you want your fridge to accept donations for dried goods such as dried goods, grains, or canned food, consider including a separate dry pantry shelf. Make sure they are situated alongside the fridge with accessibility and food safety in mind. Dry pantry shelves should never allow donations to touch the ground.

## Community Engagement and Food Safety Culture

Free fridges generally operate within very supportive communities and host-sites and are typically organized through mutual aid.<sup>6</sup> Neighbors, businesses, restaurants, local farmers, and volunteers routinely help keep the fridges stocked and running with surplus food and produce. Community members, passionate organizers, and volunteer supporters help keep fridge spaces clean, dignified, and operational.

If you're interested in working with your community to organize free fridge efforts, there are a few considerations before beginning your journey into community hunger relief.

- **Create an action plan.** Compile resources, guidelines, and standards to build a culture of food safety to ensure all food is safe for community distribution. (like visible guidelines, signage, recordkeeping, and corrective actions)
- **Developing relationships with host sites,** neighbors, restaurants, or others can ensure a greater culture of safety. Fridges that are hosted onsite at a restaurant or on a residential site are more likely to have greater visibility when incidents happen to the fridge.
- **Use social media** as a tool for community requests, monthly meetups, or cleaning help from the community.
- **Seek volunteers** to get involved with cleaning and maintaining the fridge.
- **Encourage community members** and cook enthusiasts **to include recipe cards** or "cooking kits".
- Consider **adding your Free Fridge location** to the global locator by Freedge.<sup>7</sup>
- **Find food surplus in your area:** Local farms, allotment associations, bakeries, cafes, grocery stores, and food shops might have perfectly good food that they just can't use. Apps like *Too Good To Go* can be good starting places to form relationships with businesses around town that have surplus food to donate.
- **Establish partnerships** that provide weekly restocking.
- **Hold events** for site clean-ups and cooking parties for donation meal-kit prepping.



A great example of fridge beautification: Free fridge at Nixta Taqueria in Austin, Texas organized by ATX Free Fridge.

<sup>6</sup> Mutual aid is a cooperative, participatory model of community-organized resource-sharing that emphasizes solidarity over charity and reducing barriers to access.

<sup>7</sup> Freedge, "Find a Fridge," Freedge.org, <https://freedge.org/locations/>.

## Legal Considerations & Liability

If you're serious about leading and organizing free fridge efforts in your city, here are a few considerations:

- Volunteers and free fridge organizers should complete basic food safety training and obtain their food handler certification to familiarize themselves with basic food handlers safety and their state food code.
- Volunteers and organizing bodies should operate a free fridge as if it is subject to code and up for penalty.
- Organizing groups should consider forming a 501(c)(3) or LLC to minimize liability. This is a safeguard in case any legal trouble arises from food safety liability or even community pushback against the free fridge itself.
- Establish clear agreements with host sites regarding maintenance responsibilities and duration of participation of the free fridge space.
- Operate with the expectation that the fridge may be subject to health inspections, vandalism, and will require regular maintenance and upkeep.

## Summary

Everyone has the right to safe and fresh food, no matter how they obtain it. As a center of community, free fridges are local solutions that address food justice and hunger relief through a framework of mutual aid. Furthermore, free fridges are places that can bring a neighborhood together. As a lifeline and a center of food distribution, they create value in their ability to empower communities to feed each other and pool resources. By following the suggestions in this guide, free fridge organizers, volunteers, and donors can help ensure a safe, sustainable, and dignified food-sharing space for all.



Ditmar Free Fridge in Austin, Texas. Organized by ATX Free Fridge.

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