

Seed Feeds the City

Program Overview, Purpose, and Funding Structure

Organizational Overview

Seed Feeds the City is a community-led food access and mutual aid initiative operated by Seed Theatre, a nonprofit organization serving marginalized and underserved communities throughout the Chattanooga and Hamilton County region. The program was created in response to growing levels of food insecurity, housing instability, and barriers that prevent many individuals from accessing traditional food assistance programs.

Through a network of community fridges, pantry distributions, food recovery partnerships, and volunteer-driven support systems, Seed Feeds the City provides free food and basic necessities directly to community members in need. The program operates on a low-barrier model that removes common obstacles to assistance such as identification requirements, applications, income verification, or restrictive service hours.

The work is rooted in the belief that access to food is a basic human need and that communities are stronger when neighbors directly support one another through collective care and mutual aid.

Community Need

Hamilton County continues to experience significant levels of food insecurity and economic hardship. Approximately 13–14% of residents in the area experience food insecurity, while many households rely on SNAP benefits to supplement basic nutritional needs. Rising housing costs, inflation, unemployment, and increased economic instability have created additional strain for low-income families and vulnerable individuals.

At the same time, homelessness and housing instability continue to rise throughout the region. Many people experiencing poverty or homelessness face additional barriers when attempting to access traditional assistance systems, including transportation limitations, disability access concerns, documentation requirements, stigma, or fear of discrimination.

These barriers often disproportionately impact marginalized populations, including:

- LGBTQIA+ individuals
- Immigrants and undocumented residents
- Unhoused individuals
- Low-income families
- Individuals living with chronic illness or dietary restrictions & the disabled.

Seed Theatre regularly works with individuals who are unable to consistently access nutritious food or who fall through gaps in traditional support systems. Through direct community engagement, the organization identified the need for expanded and more accessible food distribution models that prioritize dignity, accessibility, and flexibility.

Program Purpose

The purpose of Seed Feeds the City is to increase equitable access to food and essential resources while reducing waste and strengthening community support networks.

The program currently operates through:

- 10 Community refrigerators and pantry sites located throughout the area
- Food recovery partnerships with businesses and local donors
- Volunteer-led food pickups and distribution routes
- Distribution of hygiene products and essential supplies
- Emergency food support during periods of crisis or increased need

Food and supplies are distributed free of charge and made available directly within communities where access to affordable food is limited. In addition to addressing immediate hunger needs, the program also works to create long-term community resilience by building strong volunteer networks, neighborhood partnerships, and systems of mutual support.

Expansion Plan: Free Community Grocery Store

As demand for food assistance continues to increase, Seed Theatre is working to expand the program through the development of a free community grocery store in an underserved area with limited access to affordable and nutritious food. This expansion is intended to address several growing challenges within the current food distribution system.

While community fridges remain highly effective for broad public access, certain specialty dietary foods are difficult to distribute equitably through open-access models. Items such as gluten-free products, diabetic-friendly foods, allergy-conscious foods, and vegan alternatives are often taken quickly due to widespread food insecurity, even by individuals who may not specifically require them for medical or dietary reasons. Because these products are expensive and often donated in limited quantities, this can unintentionally reduce access for disabled individuals and others who rely on these foods for health and safety reasons.

The proposed free grocery store model would allow Seed Theatre to:

- Improve access to dietary-specific foods
- Provide a more dignified and private shopping environment
- Create more consistent inventory systems
- Expand service for vulnerable populations

The space would also provide a safer and more discreet environment for individuals who may feel uncomfortable accessing highly visible public food distribution sites. Reports from the Chattanooga Food Bank show an 95% reduction in immigrant use of their services since this administration began.

In-Kind Support

A significant portion of the Seed Feeds the City program is supported through in-kind donations and volunteer labor provided by community members, businesses, and local partners.

Examples of in-kind support include:

- Donated food from local businesses, farms, bakeries, and grocery partners
- Hygiene products and essential supplies donated by community members
- Volunteer labor for food sorting, transportation, stocking, cleaning, and maintenance
- Refrigeration equipment donations from Whirlpool
- Donated transportation support and fuel assistance
- Community-led supply drives and mutual aid collections

Volunteer contributions are especially critical to the success of the program. Volunteers regularly assist with food pickups, sanitation procedures, distribution routes, community fridge maintenance, and inventory organization. Without this extensive community support, the program would not be able to operate at its current scale.

Use of Financial Support

While in-kind donations provide a substantial amount of direct food, financial contributions are essential for maintaining the infrastructure and operational capacity required to safely and consistently operate the program.

Grant funding and monetary donations are used to support:

- Facility rent and utility costs
- Transportation costs for food pickups and deliveries including fuel and vehicle maintenance
- Cleaning and sanitation supplies, food-safe storage materials and shelving
- Emergency food purchasing during shortages
- Volunteer coordination and operational logistics
- Food handling and safety supplies
- Operational space for sorting and preparing distributions

For the proposed free grocery store expansion, funding would primarily support one year of facility rent and operational costs associated with establishing and maintaining the space. After 12 months of this program, Seed will reassess the need and impact of this work before continuing to operate it.

This investment would allow Seed Theatre to create a more sustainable and organized food distribution model while improving access for individuals with specialized dietary and nutritional needs.

Planned Outcomes

Through continued investment and expansion, Seed Theatre aims to achieve the following outcomes:

- Increased access to nutritious food for low-income and marginalized individuals
- Improved access to specialty dietary foods for individuals with medical or nutritional restrictions
- Reduced barriers to food assistance through low-barrier and dignity-centered distribution systems
- Increased capacity for safe food storage and distribution
- Stronger community partnerships and volunteer engagement
- Improved long-term sustainability for food access operations

The organization will evaluate success through distribution tracking, volunteer reporting, inventory monitoring, and direct community feedback from participants and partners.

Conclusion

Seed Feeds the City exists to address urgent food insecurity while building stronger systems of community care and mutual support. Through direct food access programs, volunteer engagement, and expanded infrastructure planning, Seed Theatre is working to create more equitable and accessible support systems for vulnerable individuals and families throughout the Chattanooga region.

Investment in this work supports not only immediate hunger relief, but also long-term community resilience, dignity-centered care, and sustainable systems of support for individuals most impacted by poverty, instability, and systemic barriers.

Financial Support

While in-kind donations provide a substantial amount of direct food, financial contributions are essential for maintaining the infrastructure and operational capacity required to safely and consistently operate the program.

Current Contributions:

\$110/mo pledged donations

Volunteer donated supplies: Food, Shelving, Labor, Ziplock bags and other food safe storage options, Gas and vehicle cost for delivery

In Kind Contributions from other orgs: Soon discarded and premade shelf stable foods & drinks, produce, hygiene supplies, refrigerators and freezers

Needed Contributions to Increase Capacity:

\$1000/mo for renting a new space

\$3000 once for deposit, setup, move in costs

\$1500 shelving, metal tables, etc for organization

\$300/mo for food safety measures and supplies

\$2000 to setup distribution methods – creation of a manual, guidelines, food safety, etc as well as cleaning kits for each fridge and totes to carry the donated goods from the sorting center to the fridges around the city.