Are food drives worthwhile?

By Steve Thorngate

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Are good deeds primarily about the good done for others or the good the doing does for the do-gooder?

This question comes up often in church life (hopefully in less tongue-twisting form). Should a short-term mission trip be evaluated based on work accomplished, or is it enough to energize people for future service? Are the best volunteer opportunities those with the greatest need for extra hands or those with something important to teach us? Directly deposited pledges are reliable, and they reduce busywork--but is something lost when people don't have to decide each month to write their checks?

Another example dear to many: food drives. There's something powerful about donating actual food for people to eat. I've always appreciated how my church get the kids excited about food donation, integrates it into our worship life, uses it to make connections between our local ministries and the greater world's need.

Of course, it'd be far more effective to just write a check:

> Your employer, your church, and your kids' school put out the boxes and ask everyone to drop off excess canned goods for the needy. Then the boxes are collected, sorted, and handed out to the poor. Everyone feels better about themselves, the hungry get fed, and you get to free up some much needed shelf space. It's win-win-win.

The problem is that, economically speaking, it's totally insane.

America, after all, is not a country stricken with famine. There's no objective shortage of food, in other words, that makes it vitally important for you to draw down the stockpile in your kitchen cabinet. Indeed, many of us don't even have that much food socked away, which leads to us going out to buy extra food in order to give it away. But having 100 different people go out and pay retail prices for a few cans of green beans is extraordinarily inefficient relative to pooling those funds to

buy the beans in bulk.

But it’s even worse than that. All across America, charitable organizations and the food industry have set up mechanisms through which emergency food providers can get their hands on surplus food for a nominal handling charge. Katherina Rosqueta, executive director of the Center for High Impact Philanthropy at the University of Pennsylvania, explains that food providers can get what they need for “pennies on the dollar.” She estimates that they pay about 10 cents a pound for food that would cost you $2 per pound retail. You’d be doing dramatically more good, in basic dollars and cents terms, by eating that tuna yourself and forking over a check for half the price of a single can of Chicken of the Sea.

Beyond the economies of scale are the overhead costs...

And he (Matt Yglesias) is not done yet. His argument is both obvious and devastating, a weird combination that points back to the basic problem he's taking on: perhaps food drives work so well for churches and other groups that we don't stop to notice how clearly inefficient they are at helping others.

But how easy is it to wrangle the same enthusiasm for cash donations? And what's lost?