

## Congress Considers Telling Government Agencies to 'Waste Not, Want Not'

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Like a parent warning a child not to waste food, Congress is weighing legislation that would encourage government agencies and contractors to donate surplus food from events to nonprofits that fight hunger.

The Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee is poised to approve a bill (S 2420) on April 9 that would urge federal agencies and contractors to donate leftover food to shelters, food banks and other agencies that serve the hungry. The House passed similar legislation (HR 4220) in December.

"Anything Congress can do to prevent food waste is a moral obligation for us," said Rep. Jo Ann Emerson, R-Mo., the sponsor of the House bill. "Hunger is at epidemic proportions, even in America, and every meal we can put on a table in a shelter or a soup kitchen helps fight the problem. There are three things government ought never to waste: energy, paper and food. With this bill, at least we would be one for three."

The legislation was conceived by the non-partisan anti-poverty think tank Rock and Wrap It Up, which organizes the recovery of surplus food from rock concerts, sporting contests and other events. The group's



The bill would urge agencies and contractors to donate unused food. Above, produce found in the garbage outside a New York grocery store Dec. 11, 2007.

founder, scientist Syd Mandelbaum, approached Emerson's office in 2007 with research on the amount of food wasted at government events.

Mandelbaum declined to discuss his findings publicly, but said that Emerson, who serves on the group's advisory board, was very receptive. Emerson's husband, the late Rep. Bill Emerson (1981-96), was a leading champion of food donation legislation.

New York Democrat Charles E. Schumer, sponsor of the Senate bill, took an interest because of his longtime involvement in the fight against hunger, said Mandelbaum, who first met Schumer while serving in the early 1990s as president of the Claddagh

Inn soup kitchen in Rockaway Beach, Queens. Mandelbaum said that Schumer would literally roll up his sleeves and help ladle out food to clients.

Today, Rock and Wrap It Up encourages many commercial and local event organizers and sports franchises to include a clause in their food services contracts that requires all "edible leftover food to go to local soup kitchens or shelters."

The pending legislation would alter federal contracting rules to stipulate that all government food contracts above \$25,000 must include a similar clause encouraging the donation of excess food.

### Liability Protection

Both bills would protect donors from liability for contaminated food under the legislation known as the Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Act of 1996 (PL 104-210), which says contributors of "apparently wholesome food" given in good faith cannot be held responsible for any resulting injuries.

Mandelbaum said liability is just one reason that many federal vendors have been reluctant to donate food. The bigger driver, he said, is laziness.

"I believe it just became a practice to throw it all away," he said. "This [bill] will make it a practice to donate."

Catering is at best an inexact science, so there are always going to be leftovers, Mandelbaum explained. For example, he said a catered event at the Library of Congress for about 2,000 people would leave 100 to 300 meals, or 5 percent of the food, remaining at the end of the night.

That is about the same percentage the nonprofit has found, "whether it be the Rolling Stones or Springsteen," Mandelbaum said.

His New York-based organization, which was founded in 1991 and went national in 1994, currently partners with several Washington-area nonprofits, including D.C. Central Kitchen and Shelter House. In addition to the Library of Congress, the Environmental Protection Agency and the Agriculture Department also collaborate frequently with Rock and Wrap It Up. ♦