

Ray Rogers (00:07):
I'm Ray Rogers

Annie Evans (00:08):
And I'm Annie Evans. Co-host of today's episode.

Ray Rogers (00:11):
You're listening to *Fix This*, a podcast exploring tech ideas and solutions to some of today's largest challenges. Food insecurity and hunger touch communities all around the world. According to the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations, between 720 and 811 million people face hunger in 2020 alone. And by 2030, it's projected that around 660 million people may still face hunger, partially due to the lasting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on global food security. In the US, millions of Americans struggle to put food on the table for themselves or their families. And as the issue persists, more and more people are turning to local organizations like food banks for help. But with more people needing assistance and different types and levels of assistance, how can an organization scale to meet so many different demands?

Annie Evans (1:06):
The Houston Food Bank exists to serve those in Southeast Texas suffering from food insecurity or hunger. It turned to the cloud to eliminate barriers to its services, and to better serve its communities by improving volunteer and recipient experience.

Ray Rogers (01:20):
As an Amazon Web Services (AWS) Imagine Grant winner, the Houston Food Bank is using the cloud to power, organize, and scale its home delivery service via a mobile application. With AWS, the Houston Food Bank enhances its processes digitally and improves individualized food selections—a key to establishing trust and fostering respect and dignity for the communities it serves.

Annie Evans (01:42):
To learn more, Ray chatted with Cara Gabris, director of distribution at the Houston Food Bank. Take a listen.

Cara Gabris (01:48):
We are a very large organization—the Houston Food Bank is the largest food bank in the United States in terms of distribution. We actually just celebrated our 40th anniversary so we've been in this business for quite some time. So, we have a 300,000 square foot warehouse and even during COVID, we had to get another warehouse on top of that, just because of how much distribution we had. We are providing access to over 150 million nutritious meals annually within our service area. We do this all through our partner network, so currently we have right around 1,600 partners within our network. Basically, we take the food in, we distribute that out through our partners and then they get that food directly to the consumer. We are also providing programs and other services. So, things like nutrition education, we have job training, health management, and even assistance in securing state funded benefits, such as food stamps in TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families).

Ray Rogers (02:56):

Houston Food Bank is the largest food bank in the entire US. What does that look like on a day-to-day responsibility level? How are you engaging with your partner network and volunteers and everyone else that makes this a success?

Cara Gabris (03:10):

There are approximately one million people that are served by the Houston Food Bank that are considered food insecure. And that means that these individuals are lacking consistent access to nutritious foods to have a healthy lifestyle. In order to serve this huge community, we could not do that without the partners in our network. And so, these 1,600 partners that we have are these church pantries, community centers, other nonprofit organizations that are working directly with those individuals. And another huge component of that is our volunteers. This last fiscal year, we had over 30,000 unique volunteers come through our building. Their hours of service, were over 240,000 hours.

Ray Rogers (04:02):

How did the food bank's priorities shift during this unprecedented time?

Cara Gabris (04:06):

If you would've turned on the news at that time when the pandemic started, you would've seen that we were doing massive food distributions in a drive through model. We were using any parking lot that we could find. We were in the parking lot just serving lines and lines of cars and getting food into the trunks of vehicles. That was a big shift because normally we use our partners and our network to get food out. And a lot of those partners are staffed with volunteers and those volunteers tend to be people who are retired. And in that age population that was being told, "Stay indoors, stay home, stay safe." We also realized that there was a whole population that lack transportation and so we also had to figure out how are we going to reach this population that is at home? And that is how we began doing home delivery.

Ray Rogers (05:13):

How has the project evolved and where are you today?

Cara Gabris (05:16):

When this need arose, Amazon was one of the first to reach out to us, and they're still a partner today—they provide some of our delivery services. We also were trying to do home delivery, utilizing our huge volunteer force. It was just this incredibly labor-intensive process that was neither fun for the staff and also not very fun for the volunteers. And so very early on in that planning process for the app, we learned about the AWS Imagine Grant. And we thought what a great opportunity to apply for this and really get funding for the development of this app. One of the things that really stood out is that in reading the grant application, we saw that Amazon really wanted to make lasting change and looking at solutions that were both useful and scalable. And this app is both. So, we were very excited to partner with AWS and to really be a recipient of the Imagine Grant.

Ray Rogers (06:29):

How is the cloud helping you to better meet the community's needs with the app? And how is it helping you to conceive of expanding your region, expanding your scope?

Cara Gabris (06:38):

All of our existing data is stored within AWS and having the home delivery app hosted on AWS really allows us to integrate new data and to create very powerful, analytical reports much more easily so that we can make better decisions through the data that we are collecting. With this app, we have a program for seniors who are home bound and they receive a monthly delivery of USDA box of food. And we have approximately 40 volunteers that are helping out in that program right now. And we have about 800 seniors that are recipients for the home delivery portion of that program and we create routes for those deliveries. We can actually send the route to the home delivery volunteers' phone. So instead of having that process of giving somebody a paper route that they've got to plug into their own mapping service on their phone, we send them a link and it brings up turn by turn directions on their phone of where to make those deliveries to. It's a very seamless process and very easy for our volunteers to use. We have a pantry management side of the app. So, our partners who are using this, can actually upload their inventory at their particular pantry location. So that recipients who are eligible to receive home delivery can view that available inventory and choose the foods that they are wanting to receive in their delivery. They're able to select foods that are appropriate for their dietary needs, for their cultural needs, and just for the needs of their family. We are collecting data around successful deliveries, where deliveries are being missed, notes for improving delivery efficiencies as far as locations and addresses. Really what this is doing is helping us make better informed decisions in a few ways. We are able to see on one hand where we are needing to allocate more volunteer resources, we can see popular food items that may need to be sent in higher quantities to a certain area or certain food pantry. And then also we can see where there are gaps in making sure that during this rollout period, we need to focus a rollout in these certain higher need areas, too.

Ray Rogers (09:27):

How else are you engaging with the community and how is the app changing the way that you can interact with the volunteers who are serving the community?

Cara Gabris (09:38):

Currently with the rollout, we are focusing on our food for change partners, which is a segment of our kind of broader partner network. Our food for change partners are involved in two specific programs. One is our food scholarship program that helps provide food resources to students enrolled in local colleges and universities. The other is our food RX program, which is a healthcare program that connects food to people who are referred from their healthcare provider at certain pantries of ours. So, we're currently rolling that out in those partner pantries. And the goal is that this is continued to be rolled out across our larger network. We currently have approximately 40 dedicated volunteers that we are working with Monday through Saturday. We have deliveries every day of the week, and really just continuing to build on that. The more volunteers that we can have connected to our home delivery program, the more people that we're able to serve with this app. And then for the recipients of the home delivery services, we hear nothing but amazing things that they're so gracious for this help and support. They love the connection with the volunteers, especially for so many of the recipients of this home delivery service, they don't have family around, they might live by themselves. And so, to have this be an experience where they can talk to a volunteer, have that interaction with them and receive that food, it's just such a really feel-good experience for them. And so, it's just been wonderful.

Ray Rogers ([11:41](#)):

And how do you see home delivery and all of the related work maturing over time, as you look ahead to the rest of the year and even 2023?

Cara Gabris ([11:50](#)):

I am incredibly excited about this project. What I really see as an opportunity is that this can be replicated throughout the Feeding America network in the United States and even beyond that. I think that having a technology solution to meet the needs of those who are homebound is just something that can be replicated, scaled, and expanded. I also think that this kind of shift in getting outside of the box kind of quote unquote, and letting people who are in need of food assistance choose the foods that they are wanting, that are appropriate for their own needs, is just so important in the work that we are doing. Really, I think my intent from the beginning as we were having these conversations back when we started is, this can really be something where neighbors are helping their neighbors in getting access to food. And so, the more volunteers that are incorporated in this, the more that the community benefits as a whole. And so I'm just very looking forward to the expansion of this app within Houston and beyond.

Ray Rogers ([13:16](#)):

The AWS Imagine Grant is a yearly program designed for nonprofits in the US to pursue technology driven projects to advance their missions. By providing unrestricted cash grants up to \$150,000, AWS promotional credit up to \$100,000, and technical guidance. The Imagine Grant program enables 501C organizations to leverage cloud technology to solve the world's most pressing challenges. Check out aws.amazon.com/imagine-grant to view previous winners' projects and download application instructions today.

Annie Evans ([13:51](#)):

If you liked today's episode, listen back to episode 52, distributing emergency funds, to hear how the department of housing and community development of Howard County, Maryland used AWS to deploy a cloud-based portal that connects users to assistance programs funded by the US government. To hear from other Imagine Grant winners, check out our episodes featuring the USA Games Special Olympics, the New York Philharmonic, and more. And remember, to join the conversation on social media with [#FixThisByAWS](#).

Ray Rogers ([14:20](#)):

A huge thank you to our guest, Cara, and thank you for tuning in. If you like today's show, please remember to subscribe, rate, review, and share. We'll be here on the next one.