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Reusable Bag Redistribution Project Supports the Needy in New Jersey

Project Supported by State Litter Tax Ensures Food Banks Have Free Reusable Bags

TRENTON – July 17, 2024 – In just a limited rollout over the last year, the New Jersey Clean Communities Council (NJCCC), in partnership with Goatote and other stakeholders, launched a groundbreaking plan in which residents can easily donate their unwanted reusable bags to local food pantries and food banks.

The impact was instantaneous. Over the last 12 months, the NJCCC estimates that hundreds of thousands of bags have been collected, sanitized and distributed to those in need. One project, for example, is from a key NJCCC partner, Goatote, which reported its 24 drop-off sites throughout New Jersey generated 130,000 reusable bags over those 12 months.

All bags eligible for reuse were donated to area food pantries and food banks for distribution to those in need.

Moreover, other government partners have coordinated their own reusable bag redistribution projects, greatly increasing the number of bags that have been cleaned and donated across New Jersey.

“This closed-loop project has greatly exceeded our expectations,” said NJCCC Executive Director JoAnn Gemenden. “Working with our partners around the state, permanent donation bins were set up at various government sponsored locations as well as one day special events. People eagerly donated their unwanted bags, which were then thoroughly cleaned and donated.

“When we recognized there was a gap with extra reusable bags and the need for our food banks and food pantries to acquire those bags, we became the lynchpin to bring all of those stakeholders and partners together to close the gap,” Gemenden added.

There are many reasons why people have extra reusable bags following the May 4, 2022 state law that stopped the practice of stores giving out flimsy, single-use plastic bags. Online stores, as well as supermarket delivery services, provide reusable bags to fulfill their orders, which can generate surplus.

The NJCCC, which strongly advocated for the state’s landmark single-use grocery bag ban, has taken on the role of ensuring ongoing success and sustainability. To date, it is estimated that more than 8.4 billion single-used bags have been removed from the waste stream in New Jersey each year because of the law.

“Just imagine the impact in New Jersey if we had hundreds of drop-off locations,” Gemenden added. “We would then be able to ensure that any New Jerseyan who has extra reusable bags can easily donate them in their local community, rather than store them or, worse, throw them out. The key to this project is convenience.”

The cost to reuse a bag is about 70% less than to buy new, which follows the intent of the state law that encourages reuse, Gemenden said.

NJCCC oversees the education and engagement efforts of the state’s bag ban through its [Litter Free NJ](#) program, in a role mandated by the state Legislature. The NJCCC has been working with Goatote, a private entity that collects, sanitizes and distributes reusable bags.

Linda Doherty, president of NJCCC’s Board of Directors, said the reusable bag project is a “first in the nation” initiative at such a grand scale, as New Jersey continues to lead the way in its litter-fighting initiatives.

“We have built this project from the ground up,” she said. “There is no state that is as organized in addressing the need for reusable bags to be collected, sanitized and donated to those in need. The results have been both instant and effective. With the right resources, and a steady funding stream from the ongoing New Jersey litter tax to support the costs of sanitizing tons of bags statewide, there is no doubt this project can be even more impactful.”

Renee Lundahl, a co-founder of Goatote in Hackettstown, said her company’s collection project was launched in January 2023, bringing together retailers, recyclers, food banks, community organizations, the NJCCC and the New Jersey Food Council.

[A Reusable Bag Resource Center](#) was posted on LitterFreeNJ.com, which guides residents to donation locations in their communities. This online center also includes open-source marketing materials, as well as a QR code that directs people to drop-off centers for their extra reusable bags.

“This innovative and impactful project provides the key connection between stakeholders, residents with extra bags, and the food pantries and food banks that truly need them to service the public,” Lundahl explained. “By combining comprehensive logistics, eco-friendly cleaning processes, and redistribution, a blueprint for the success of this project was created.”

She noted the cleaning process is a key element, ensuring every bag is fully sanitized and safe for reuse and carrying food.

After careful planning, the first drop-off location opened in Secaucus last May, with more and more spots opening over the past 12 months at recycling centers, libraries and other public buildings.

Moreover, the NJCCC and its partners have opened drop-off locations at street fairs, paper shredding events, local concerts and other places where people congregate. Lundahl noted that there is a spike in collection during the warmer months, when there are more outdoor community events held, as well as during Earth Month in April.

Municipalities and counties can use their annual Clean Communities grant funding from the state, supported by a special tax on companies that generate the most litter, to participate in the bag redistribution project. Learn more at NJClean.org



Photo Caption: Atlantic County Utilities Authority staff Rebecca Turygan (l) and Amy Menzel (r) with a volunteer at the Community FoodBank of New Jersey in Egg Harbor Township