

RECEIVING

Donations for Citations initiatives take off among parking programs — for great reason.

By Kim Fernandez

Gary Means, CAPP, executive director of the Lexington & Fayette County Parking Authority (LEXPARK) in Kentucky, got a reminder that his Food for Fines program drums up warm fuzzies in the community after a quick chat with a front desk employee midway through last year's campaign. "She worked up front," he says, "and she said one day, 'I don't think anybody's yelled at me in like a month!'"

Those who've spearheaded similar programs in other parking organizations say much the same thing. The campaigns, which let people pay part or all of their parking violations with food, toiletries, and other needed items, do more than serve the invaluable goal of stocking pantry shelves for in-need families. They also create a sense of community between parking operations and their constituents, which can be a tough thing to do.

Donations for citations programs are growing in popularity, and it's easy to see why. LEXPARK's program collected about four tons of food for a local pantry last year. "It was a little more than 8,000 food items," says Means. But the programs also give parking organizations a lot of public goodwill, media attention, and a boost behind the desk as employees get into the generous spirit and drivers exchange complaints for warm smiles.

DONATIONS for CITATIONS



Customers with any parking citation issued before the start of the campaign with a balance due can donate from the following categories to receive a designated dollar amount up to **\$30 towards their citation fee**



**non-perishable
canned goods & dry goods**

10 items = \$30

the following items will be accepted: canned fruit, cereal, instant oatmeal, pasta, rice, pasta sauce, jams and jellies, condiments, canned tuna or canned chicken & nut butter

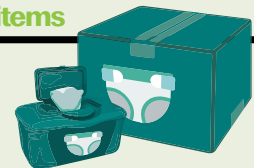
Expired, damaged or opened donations will not be accepted. Refrigerated items and glass containers will not be accepted.

diapers & personal care items

5 items = \$30

the following items will be accepted: shampoo, hand soap, hand sanitizer, toilet paper (minimum size of 4 pack), toothpaste, shaving cream, razors & feminine products

Expired, damaged or opened donations will not be accepted. Trial sizes of personal care items will not be accepted.



and GIVING



The Programs

LEXPARK's Food for Fines program started to let people trade food for God's Pantry, a well-respected food bank in the area, in exchange for money due on parking violations. "We start the Monday of Thanksgiving week and end it about four weeks later," Means says. "What worked best for us is that every 10 cans donated equals \$15 off any violation."

The program took off very quickly. "The first year, it pulled out a lot of people who had old violations and wanted their records clear," he says. Now, people start calling the office weeks ahead of time asking if Food for Fines is on the calendar again.

"Last year, we had a couple of people who had \$250 ADA violations bring in 75 cans," he says. "One person had a rolling suitcase of food. Our team helps—people bring all these cans in their trunks, and we go out with dollies into the parking garage and help them. People really enjoy it, and our staff enjoys it."

Some people even wait to pay their ticket fines until the program kicks up again. "Some people like the idea of donating," he says. "They don't want to give a dime to us so they'll wait for this."

The University of Delaware started a similar campaign shortly after hearing about LEXPARK's. "We borrowed the idea from Gary," says Parking Manager Jennifer



Sparks. Their program lets people pay off tickets that are 30 days old or older with cans—each can takes \$5 off a citation. Sparks says she also starts getting questions in the summer about the program, which runs from Thanksgiving week to the end of the fall semester.

“We tell people you don’t need a citation to give,” she says. “We put barrels around campus, by the library, and in garages and near the ice arena for people to donate without citations.” Those paying tickets with food bring their cans to the parking office, and all donations go to the Food Bank of Delaware.

Her officers even distribute tickets in special envelopes during the campaign. “We normally use yellow Tyvek envelopes, but our officers distribute orange envelopes that explain the program during that time,” she says. “They tell people their citation might be eligible for the cans program. Our staff enjoys it—they really like talking with people about it.”

Some people wait to pay citations until the program starts, but that can be tricky, she says. “Citations go to student accounts after 30 days,” she says. “If the citation’s still with us, they can pay with food items, and we include the late fees. If the citation has gone to student accounts or to collections, it’s there, and we can’t do anything about that.”

Different programs do different things at all times of the year:

- Parking violators in Albany, N.Y., had their late fines waived last fall and were strongly encouraged to donate canned food items in exchange. They collected 1.5 tons of food for a local bank.
- Drivers in Tallahassee, Fla., received a \$1 credit for every can donated last year during a Food for Fines program there.
- Texas Tech University Transportation & Parking Services won a *Parking Matters*® Marketing & Communications Award last year for its Pop Tarts for Tickets campaign, which let drivers pay off tickets with boxes of toaster pastries—those were donated to Food2Kids.
- Several departments at the University of Texas San Antonio team up in the fall for the Peanut Butter Parking Campaign, which lets drivers pay off tickets with donations of specific amounts of peanut butter. Last year, the program donated 768 pounds of peanut butter for the San Antonio Food Bank and won a *Parking Matters* award for its efforts.
- A Donations for Citations program at the University of North Texas lets drivers exchange one can of food for \$2.50 off unpaid tickets for two weeks in December. Drivers there can also trade 10 non-perishable food items for the \$25 late fee of any citation already in collections.



- University of Kentucky students and faculty could trade one ticket for 10 food items or five personal care items last spring. The Big Blue Pantry received 2,441 pounds of food and 381 pounds of personal items from the campaign.
- Park Cedar Rapids, Iowa, let drivers exchange donations for tickets up to \$100 in value. They offered a specific list of what could be traded for which violations; a 64-count package of baby wipes and an 18-count package of diapers waived a \$10 fine, for example.

Debbie Hoffmann, CAPP, associate director of transportation services at Texas A&M University, says the Donations for Citations program they held last spring was a tremendous success on a number of levels.

“We called some people who’d done this before; we watched and read what they were doing, and then we picked the parts that would be best suited to our campus and what we were trying to accomplish,” she says. “We narrowed it down to food items, and then we added in personal items as well.”

Drivers who donated 10 canned or dry food items and those who donated five packages of diapers or personal care items received \$30 toward parking citations. “We had so much positive response,” she says. “People were bringing in well more than what was required to get the amount removed from their citations.”

Things to Consider

Donations for citations programs do a lot of good, but organizers say there are things to consider before jumping in.

Picking a time for a campaign is the first consideration, and it’s not a bad idea to contact food banks or charities to see what works best for them. “We’ve given some thought to moving off the holiday timeframe to the spring, which is when we hear donations are lowest,” says Means. The potential downside of that was that the program wouldn’t get the same buzz it does at the holidays, when people are feeling charitable.

He also advises thinking about what can be traded for what and making it very clear. “The first year we



were uncomfortable taking food for safety-related violations such as parking in a crosswalk or on a yellow curb,” he says. His team thought about exempting those violations but decided it would be too confusing for the community. “We didn’t want to confuse people, and we wanted something that was easier for sound bites, so we went with 10 cans for \$15 off any citation,” he says.

Parking operations also have to consider the money aspect. “One of our biggest impacts is financial” says Sparks. “Obviously, we get nothing for parking citations when this is going on. That revenue is just gone. But the goodwill this brings us is priceless. A lot of people have negative thoughts about parking. We really market this, and we really promote it. It’s good for the students and the food bank, and it’s good for us.”

Choosing a charity can be a stumbling block. “You want to think about this ahead of time and pick a food bank or an organization that has a good reputation in your community,” says Means. “We have lots of great churches who do great work in this area, but we felt like as a public agency, it’s good for us to work with a broader food bank. We didn’t want any organization that had had issues in the media. So we picked God’s Pantry, and nobody has questioned us at all—they’re known for doing great work.”





Sparks says it's worth giving thought to where donations will be stored and how they'll get to the charity receiving them. "The first year, it took us three trips in two trucks to get it to them," she says. "The next two years, we had them pick it up, but the timing is tough—it's the Monday before Christmas and it's busy for them and for us. This year, we're enlisting one of our partners, University Movers. They're used to lifting heavy things. They're going to come pick it all up and deliver it. It costs us a little bit, but it's well worth it."

Hoffmann adds that there's a balance between wanting donations and not wanting people to either let citations go to collections or having people park illegally just because they can pay with food during a certain time. "We're a little cautious about it," she says. "We don't advertise when we'll do it ahead of time."

And it takes training for staff to know what to accept or not accept. "Our people are tenacious about checking expiration dates," says Sparks. "People sometimes bring in old stuff and go through cabinets to find things they don't want."

All in all, however, those who run programs say the goodwill, chance to help others, and spirit of the programs are well worth the planning. "My biggest piece of advice is to try to reduce your anxiety and your fear and just do this," says Hoffmann. "It has been 100 percent positive." **P**



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