AGP Allegiance Group & Pursuant

Sustainer Giving for *Food Banks*

How Recurring Giving Can Become a Core Growth Strategy for Your Organization

teamallegiance.com

Contents

Introduction

In today's fundraising landscape, *recurring giving* — often referred to as sustainer or monthly giving — has become one of the most reliable ways for food insecurity organizations to weather economic uncertainty and deepen donor loyalty.

But despite its proven long-term value, many food banks and hunger-relief organizations still treat sustainer programs as an afterthought. Philanthropist and author Lisa Greer, in her appearance on the Go Beyond Fundraising podcast, didn't mince words: "Recurring giving programs are treated like red-headed stepchildren."[1] With a wry tone but serious intent, she highlighted a problem that food insecurity organizations can no longer afford to ignore.

In this guide, we'll explore why sustainer giving should be front and center in your long-term fundraising strategy. We'll examine current economic conditions, shifting donor behavior, and real-life performance data that make a compelling case for recurring giving. Drawing on decades of experience building and optimizing sustainer programs, we'll map out a framework to help food insecurity organizations build, scale, and sustain a high-performing monthly giving program that keeps shelves stocked and meals moving to those who need them most.

SECTION 1

The Economic Imperative: Inflation, Instability, and the Need for Predictable Revenue

Food insecurity organizations are *under pressure*. Inflation continues to outpace wage growth, and economic pessimism among middle- and lower-income households is rising.

Many food banks are facing cuts to federal and state funding while navigating increased competition for donor dollars. The traditional calendar-based fundraising cycle — once sufficient to meet annual budget goals — is no longer enough.

Amid this volatility, sustainer giving provides something every food bank desperately needs: stability.

Monthly donations create a predictable revenue stream that allows organizations to plan ahead, invest confidently, and avoid the feast-or-famine cycle that can derail mission-critical work — ensuring no family goes hungry. Unlike major gifts or episodic appeals, recurring donations don't rely on year-end urgency or one-off emergencies. They accumulate quietly, consistently, and powerfully over time.

AGP's resident recurring giving expert Kim Richardson, emphasizes this point with clarity: "Recurring giving reduces cash flow worries, allows for more mission focus, and enables more reliable budgets for planning." For overstretched development teams, that predictability is worth its weight in gold.

SECTION 2

The Donor Behavior Shift:
Subscription Culture Meets Social Good

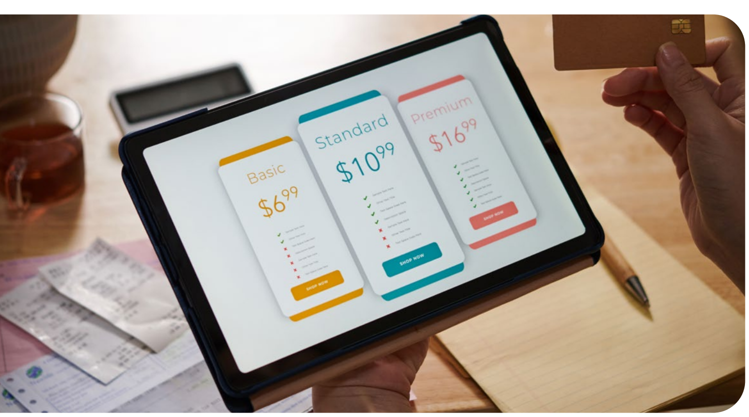
A second force driving the rise of sustainer giving is *consumer behavior*. From Spotify and Netflix to HelloFresh and Amazon Prime, people are increasingly accustomed to monthly subscription models.

Millennials and Gen Z, in particular, are fluent in these recurring relationships, and therefore expect simplicity, transparency, and immediate value.

This trend isn’t just about convenience — it’s psychological. A growing body of research shows that subscription models don’t just fulfill a need; they foster identity. One recent study found that subscribers often develop emotional attachments to the brands or causes they support on a recurring basis.[2] It’s not just a transaction — it’s a reflection of who they are. Whether it’s a coffee bean subscription box or a monthly gift to a local food bank, recurring models create emotional “membership” in a lifestyle or mission.

For hunger-relief organizations, this means monthly donors see themselves as partners in feeding families, not just contributors. That personal connection fosters profound loyalty — and in this sector, it translates to longer retention and deeper impact.

It’s no surprise, then, that these same donors prefer a similar experience when giving. They want to know their impact, feel part of a movement, and engage with organizations that speak their language. According to research from the Blackbaud Institute, younger donors are more likely than previous generations to commit to monthly support — provided the experience is personal, frictionless, and mission-driven.[3]



Greer’s commentary on this trend is striking. “We need to stop treating donors like ATMs,” she said. “It’s not about hitting them up for cash. It’s about creating real relationships — ones where donors feel seen, heard, and valued.”

In other words, sustainer programs can’t just be functional — they have to be relational.

SECTION 3

The Value Proposition: Recurring Donors Give More and Stay Longer

Still, many food insecurity organizations fail to invest in *recurring giving programs* — even though the math is compelling.

Consider this:

- **The average monthly gift is $52**, translating to $624 annually — significantly higher than the average one-time gift.[4]
- **Retention for recurring donors is between 80–95%**, compared to a sector-wide average of 46% for general donor retention.[5]
- **Most monthly donors stay engaged for 5–7 years.**[6]
- Monthly donors are more likely to upgrade, contribute special gifts, and convert to mid-level or planned giving over time.[7]

$52	AVERAGE MONTHLY GIFT
80-95%	RETENTION FOR RECURRING DONORS
5-7 yrs	LENGTH OF TIME MONTHLY DONORS STAY ENGAGED

In fact, monthly donors now contribute more than 30% of digital fundraising revenue, and their loyalty often translates into advocacy and volunteerism. They are not just donors — they're part of your community. For example, a monthly donor may start by covering fresh produce for one family and later grow into supporting entire holiday meal distributions.

As Richardson notes, "Recurring donors lessen stress on development teams. Instead of chasing big gifts all the time, you get a dependable, mission-aligned revenue base. It frees you to focus on strategy."

Yet despite these benefits, many sustainer programs remain under-resourced. Greer's "red-headed stepchild" metaphor captures this reality perfectly: They're often neglected, misunderstood, or misused.

SECTION 4

Making the Case Internally: From Tactical Add-On to Strategic Priority

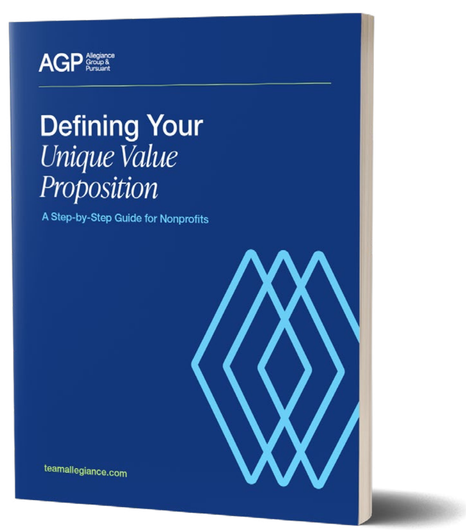
Changing that mindset starts with *building an internal business case*. Food bank leaders need to shift the perception of monthly giving from a passive donor preference to an active strategic priority.

Here's how to do it:

1. Know Your Why

Craft a compelling case for support grounded in your organization's unique value proposition (UVP). Why should someone become a monthly donor to your mission specifically? What impact will they have?

This case must blend appeal ("Is this a problem that matters to me?") with exclusivity ("Is this something I can only do through your organization?"). Without both, it's easy for donors to lose interest — or give elsewhere.



DOWNLOAD NOW

2. Quantify the Impact

Use clear, concrete math to show how monthly donations support your work. For example:

> *“A $50 monthly gift provides 150 meals. Your monthly support ensures families don’t have to choose between paying bills and putting food on the table.”*

These impact statements should be program-specific, visually compelling, and easy to understand.

3. Name and Brand Your Program

Don’t bury your recurring option on a generic donation form. Give it a name. Build a landing page. Make joining feel like a decision that *matters*. Benefits like impact reports, exclusive webinars, digital badges, and branded thank-yous can reinforce the sense of belonging.

4. Build an Omni-channel Recruitment Strategy

Coordinate efforts across direct mail, email, social media, your website, and any other donor touchpoints. Use storytelling, testimonials, and urgency-driven campaigns (e.g., “Be 1 of the 100”) to bring in new sustainers. This is where a coordinated acquisition and retention strategy becomes critical.

SECTION 5

Best Practices for Long-Term Growth

Once donors enroll, the *real work begins*. Sustainer programs only thrive when donors feel connected.

Here’s how top-performing programs maintain strong retention and even grow giving over time:

1. Thank and Onboard Immediately

A thoughtful welcome email or letter, a short video from your team, or a personal call can build the foundation for a long-term relationship. Share stories of families served or a quick video tour of your pantry to connect donors directly to the impact of their gift.

2. Segment and Personalize

Use your CRM and analytics tools to track preferences, giving history, and behavior — and act on those insights. Tailor your communications to reinforce relevance and appreciation.

3. Surprise and Delight

Send unannounced updates, invitations to behind-the-scenes events, or small tokens of appreciation. These gestures humanize your organization and elevate the experience.

4. Upgrade Thoughtfully

Twelve months in, reach out with an invitation to increase their gift — backed by a strong impact story. But be gracious and respectful if they decline.

5. Ask for Additional One-Time Gifts

Limit this to no more than 3–4 times per year. Timing these appeals around key campaigns or emergencies can be effective without creating donor fatigue.

6. Plan for Re-Engagement

Don’t let lapsed sustainers quietly disappear. Create reactivation journeys via email, text, or even direct mail. If they rejoin, welcome them back warmly.

These touchpoints should reinforce impact — not interrupt the donor experience.

SECTION 6

Staff and Resource Considerations

Sustainer programs require *ownership*. At minimum, one full-time staff member should manage onboarding, communications, and reporting.

Additional support from data and digital teams — especially those with experience in segmentation, automation, and analytics — can significantly accelerate growth.

We recommend:

- A dedicated point person to serve as a "concierge" for recurring givers
- Support for data hygiene, communication preferences, and credit card expirations
- A digital fundraising partner to optimize omni-channel outreach

This investment may feel steep, but the long-term ROI is undeniable. Consider it a down payment on your organization's future resilience.

SECTION 7

Shifting the Culture

If Lisa Greer's critique sounds familiar, it's because many food insecurity organizations still *prioritize short-term wins* over long-term health.

Monthly giving gets squeezed between holiday food drives and year-end appeals. It's treated like a "nice to have" rather than a strategic pillar. But in today's landscape, that's not just shortsighted — it's dangerous.

"There is this weird belief that if somebody gives a recurring amount, they're going to give a smaller amount... and that it's going to then get in the way of them giving a one-time gift or giving an annual gift," Greer explains. "All the research says that's absolutely false."

In fact, she notes, "People that give monthly are more attached to your organization. About 90% of them are still with you two or three years later. For one-time or annual givers, only about 18% give in the second year."

Recurring giving, far from competing with other forms of support, actually cultivates deeper loyalty and long-term generosity. It's not just a fundraising tool. It's a loyalty-building model that pays dividends well beyond the monthly gift.

CONCLUSION

The Path Forward

Sustainer giving is not a secondary strategy. It's a *sustainable*, *scalable*, and *donor-friendly model* for long-term fundraising success.

It provides financial security for food banks and meaningful engagement for donors who want to fight hunger year-round.

- **The data is there.**
- **The tools are available.**
- **The demand is growing.**

Now is the time to take recurring giving out of the shadows and into the spotlight. Treat it as the heart of a modern, mission-aligned development strategy.

If you're ready to strengthen your recurring giving strategy, ***AGP can help you build, scale, and sustain a high-performing program.***

Because in a world that feels increasingly uncertain, donors don't just want to give. *They want to belong — and know they're helping put food on the table for families in need.*

Endnotes

1 https://teamallegiance.com/resources/on-a-mission-to-save-giving-with-philanthropist-and-fundraising-coach-lisa-greer/

2 Kerschbaumer, R. H., Kreimer, D., Foscht, T., & Eisingerich, A. B. (2022). *Subscription commerce: An attachment theory perspective.* The International Review of Retail, Distribution and Consumer Research.

3 https://community.blackbaud.com/blogs/61/9557

4 https://donorbox.org/nonprofit-blog/turn-one-time-donors-into-recurring-donors

5 https://bloomerang.co/blog/the-state-of-donor-retention-in-one-image/

6 https://www.nonprofitpro.com/post/treat-monthly-donors-best-friend-death-part/

7 https://doublethedonation.com/monthly-giving-program/

MORE ABOUT AGP

Turning Missions Into Movements

At AGP, we help nonprofits turn missions into *movements* — and supporters into passionate *champions*.

We're a strategic partner to mission-driven teams who want more than short-term wins. Our work blends insight and creativity to strengthen what matters most: deeper connection, lasting loyalty, and the resources to power your mission.

We've walked in your shoes. We understand the complexity nonprofits face—because we've lived it. That experience grounds our approach in authenticity, humility, and deep respect for your work.

From donor journeys to brand storytelling, direct mail to digital engagement, and data to design—we bring both intelligence and heart to help you grow what matters.

Whether you're looking to inspire action, modernize your strategy, or simply cut through the noise—we will meet you where you are and build from there.

This isn't just fundraising. It's not just marketing.

It's how powerful missions take root, gain momentum, and grow.

Choose AGP for Strategy & Consulting, Direct Mail, Web Design & Development, Digital Marketing, Advocacy, Membership Acquisition & Retention, Donation Platforms, Loyalty Programs, and more. Our clients feed the hungry, heal the sick, nourish souls, enrich lives, care for animals, and build minds. You have an important goal, and we're thrilled to leverage our blend of data, technology, and award-winning creative to get you there.

AGP Allegiance Group & Pursuant

Contact Us

We'd love to connect *to learn more about your mission and the goals we can help you achieve.*

teamallegiance.com/connect-with-us
844-858-7654 | connect@teamallegiance.com