

The story behind America's most-ticketed food program



Volunteer Shere Dore receives a ticket from Houston Police. source: @foodnotbombshtx via Instagram

HOUSTON, TX: It's been over a year that *Food not Bombs* has been issued tickets by Houston police for feeding hungry people, but their legal troubles might be finally coming to an end. After 96 individual tickets totalling more than \$175,000, a U.S. District Court judge has ordered

the city of Houston to stop enforcing the food ordinance law which requires city permission to distribute food in public spaces after a lawsuit was filed by Food not Bombs Houston (FNBH).

Food Not Bombs

Food not Bombs is a grassroots non-profit created by anti-nuclear activists that has been serving cities across North America and the globe for over 30 years. *Food Not Bombs Houston* (FNBH) has operated since 2005, and have been gathering in front of the Houston Public Library since 2012. The group of volunteers gathers four times a week to service the hungry population in Houston. They began operating in front of the library after the food ordinance law that is impacting them today was passed. The mayor at the time, Annise Parker gave FNBH permission to serve at their current location.

FNBH served food in city-owned area in front of the library without issue until March 1, 2023 when they were given their first ticket for violating the food ordinance law. In the 12 months that followed, FNBH volunteers were given tickets nearly every single night they served. The tickets were not given to the organization, but the individual volunteers trying to make a positive impact on their community.

Ending the food ordinance law

The City of Houston introduced the food sharing ordinance in 2012. The law stipulates that any group handing out food to more than five people would need permission from whoever owned the land being used. The law was not enforced until 2023 when FNBH began receiving tickets.

FNBH filed a lawsuit in March of 2023 against the City of Houston. The court ordered that FNBH may continue to feed the homeless but only if the group relocated. FNBH argued that they are being targeted at their location because of its proximity to a police station, sometimes making FNBH groupings a gathering for protests. FNBH originally started serving at the library because of its cruciality to displaced populations. The library is one of the few air-conditioned buildings that allows unhoused people to use it as a resource, making it a hub for the type of people who need FNBH.

After the lawsuit in 2023, FNBH made no attempt at resisting the tickets, or fighting them legally, instead garnering donations to help pay them off, all while lobbying to government officials through the use of petitions and letters. The petitions did little to help as police continued to issue tickets to volunteers trying to help people in need.

“It seems like more and more these days, society is clamping down on the poor,” told volunteer Shere Dore to the Houston Chronicle after signing for another ticket. FNBH was shocked after mayor Sylvester Turner began enforcing a decade-old law in 2023; a law that Turner knew affected FNBH more than any other organization.

A light in the dark

In January of 2024, FNBH took legal action once again, filing a lawsuit against the City of Houston. The suit argued that the ordinance was unconstitutional in multiple ways. On February

14, a U.S. District Court judge ordered that the city of Houston cease their enforcement of the law immediately.

FNBH is now working to get the food ordinance law reversed entirely, citing that after ten years, it has failed to what it set out to do. “We are on the road to not only removing this ordinance but setting a pathway for other cities to do the same against anti homeless and anti-food sharing laws and in general to fight against class war,” said the organization via a social media post.

FNBH has not received a ticket since February 14, they continue to serve food to those who need it four nights a week with the support of their volunteers and the community.

