

# TREE CARE INDUSTRY

M A G A Z I N E

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# SPREADING THE WARMTH: Firewood Donations an Investment in Community



*Volunteers tackle a pile of wood at the Cumberland Wood Bank in Maine. Photo by Bruce Wildes.*

*By Clarisse Hart*

Every weekend across the U.S., log splitters and chain saws rev as community volunteers and arborists come together to process free firewood for people in need. The firewood programs – known regionally as wood banks, firewood ministries or charity cuts – are similar in concept to a food bank. They start small, a few passionate folks helping a neighbor fill an empty woodpile.

As demand grows, so does local support. Each wood bank is backed by a different cast of allies: landowners, tree service companies, churches, municipalities, real estate developers, schools, equipment dealers – even correctional facilities. There's no "right" formula, but the involvement of tree care professionals sets some wood banks apart, bolstering their wood supply and increasing safety at volunteer work sites.

There are now at least 65 wood bank programs in the U.S., in rural areas, suburbs and cities across 21 states (see map compiled by the author at [www.woodbank.org/](http://www.woodbank.org/)

[woodbanks-directory-map/](http://www.woodbanks-directory-map/)). Some process and distribute more than 500 cords of wood a year. The longest-running program will celebrate its 40th season this winter.

Bruce Wildes, who leads the Cumberland Wood Bank in Maine, is quick to point out that wood banks are not trying to compete with firewood sellers. "We're doing something different," he says. The

firewood is usually distributed less than a cord at a time. It's meant to be an emergency stop-gap, not a full-winter supply.

The Cumberland Wood Bank delivered 100 cords last winter, its ninth year in operation. Every weekend from April to October, a dozen volunteers get together to process donated logs into cordwood.

Lucas Tree Experts, a TCIA mem-



*Splitters and firewood processors, such as those used by the Cumberland Wood Bank, above, make work more efficient.*

ber company based in Portland, Maine, donates chain saws, files, chains, bars and personal protective equipment to the Cumberland program.

“We help how we can,” says Chuck Cotton, Lucas Tree Expert’s Residential Division manager. “The owners want to be good members of the community. They see there’s certainly a need. From a standpoint of dollar figures, the value isn’t that much, but it goes a long way in helping out the cause.”

Most wood-bank clients are seniors, low-income families and the disabled. Some programs triage wood requests based on income; others operate on the honor system.

Denise Kissel coordinates the Warmth for Wake program in Wake County, North Carolina, which distributed nearly 300 cords of wood last year. She describes their screening process: “I’ll talk to them and figure out their situation. It isn’t super formal. But I’ve never delivered wood to the country club.”

Some wood banks have experienced wood theft or a smattering of dishonest wood requests. A combination of community peer pressure and built-in checks and balances keeps the programs on track and on mission.

A serve-yourself wood bank at the Salem United Methodist Church in Missouri is labeled with a sign that reads: “Community Wood Bank. Please don’t take it all. Everybody needs a chance.” Pastor Doug Walter says he can see the wood pallets from his office window. When supply gets low, he’ll send an email to his contact list: “The wood bank is overdrawn; can someone make a deposit?” And the stack piles up again. “It’s a community that wouldn’t necessarily give you \$45, but they’ll bring you \$45 worth of wood,” he says. They don’t track their distribution, but when I spoke to him last winter, he estimated that seven cords of wood had come and gone that week alone.

### From logs to cordwood

It takes a village to supply a wood bank with enough logs to meet a cold winter’s demand.

A small but growing number of parks, natural resource departments, private-sector sawmills and real estate developers



*Volunteers with a youth group haul wood at the Greene County Wood Ministry in Tennessee, where they won’t take wood donations from outside their county due to an emerald ash borer quarantine.*

donate portions of their clearing harvests to wood banks. Many receive tax benefits for their contributions.

The Ocean View Retirement Community in Maine has donated 25 cords’ worth of logs to the Cumberland Wood Bank and pledges to contribute 95 percent of its hardwood clearing harvests in the future.

Some wood banks buy their own logs using a small pool of fundraised cash.

Most often, though, logs are donated by homeowners via tree care companies working on their property. Most wood-bank crews don’t have the insurance to cover tree felling, but they will retrieve felled logs if you point them in the right direction.

Jason LaDue of Aerials Tree Service in

Salem, Oregon, has helped homeowners donate wood to the local Salem Alliance Church firewood ministry for the past seven years. “We were working across the fence from each other,” he remembers. “I saw these guys out there, splitting big pieces of firewood by hand. They asked me what I was going to do with the firewood from the job I was working on. I said I wasn’t sure and they offered to take it, and that’s how it started.”

According to tree service companies, the benefits of partnership go both ways.

“Homeowners like the fact that the firewood will be going to a charitable cause,” says LaDue. “It factors into people’s decision-making of who they want to hire to

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do their work.”

R&R Tree Service, a TCIA member company, also contributes wood to the Salem Alliance wood ministry in Oregon. R&R maintains a list of organizations that will retrieve wood for homeowners, including The Salvation Army and a nearby juvenile correctional facility. Jannai Cornett, secretary at R&R, says homeowners appreciate the tax receipt non-profits can give them for the market value of the firewood.

Over the past 15 years, Salem Alliance

has streamlined their wood pick-up process with an online form where donors describe the wood and its exact location. A volunteer dispatcher approves the pick-up and sends out a truck and crew. “The companies know within a couple of days the logs will be gone,” says Melanie Pfaff, community impact coordinator at Salem Alliance Church. “We have years of consistency helping to service their customers.”

LaDue remembers his first donation to Salem Alliance: “I removed a great big fir



*Melissa LeVangie, CTSP, with hard hat, and other volunteers process wood at the wood bank in Petersham, Massachusetts.*

tree from a very tight spot in a historic district here in Salem. They came and collected seven cords of firewood from the log overnight. I’m not kidding. I left it in the afternoon and it was gone the morning after that. They had a couple of splitters and about eight kids from the congregation. I would like to have seen them doing it.”

### Firewood on the road

Most wood banks don’t move wood more than 15 miles, for efficiency’s sake and out of caution for insect pests.

In pest-quarantined counties, natural resource departments and utility companies increasingly will donate portions of their harvests to local wood banks.

“The mountain pine beetle has hit our area hard, so we have a lot of standing dead and dying pine, and a lot of timber available,” says Rick Hartz, president of the Beaverhead Community Wood Bank Ministry, Inc., in western Montana, which distributes between 100 and 200 cords a year.

The Greene County Wood Ministry in Tennessee won’t take wood donations from outside their county, per emerald ash borer quarantine rules put in place by the state Department of Agriculture.

In Massachusetts, where emerald ash borer is just beginning to spread in the state, wood banks may begin to proliferate, since ash can be burned green.

Even when counties aren’t quarantined,

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*A group of volunteers with the Petersham, Mass., wood bank share a celebratory cheer after a good day's work at the wood pile. Photo by Clarisse Hart.*

wood banks tend to be choosy about the wood they'll accept. They want wood that burns safely and efficiently. Depending on the region, wood banks mainly process hardwoods like oak and maple, as well as fir and bull pine. They won't take cottonwood, white pine or poplar.

Every wood bank handles log storage and processing differently. Space is often a challenge. Some programs store logs on church property or on land owned by volunteers or tree service companies. Others use municipal- or state-owned wood landings.

The Cumberland Wood Bank recently outgrew its municipal lot and was given an acre of space by a contractor who also loans them a dump truck every week.

The Greene County Wood Ministry in Tennessee uses an old, empty factory building on a two-acre lot – at least, says the building owner, until the building sells.

#### Teams at work

Behind every Wood Bank is a group of devoted volunteers. Some are students and young families. Most are over the age of 60.

At the Long's Chapel Firewood Ministry in North Carolina, volunteers collect, process and deliver wood year-round. Coordinator Richard Reeves, who is 68, works at the wood pile nearly every day. In 11 years, he has put in more than 15,000 hours of time and personally delivered al-

most 2,500 cords of wood.

Other wood banks, such as Firewood for Families at the Chesapeake Church in Maryland, host one big work day in December to process the wood they've collected throughout the year. Last year, on one Saturday morning, 150 volunteers processed and delivered 80 cords of wood. To celebrate, the church served an old-fashioned country brunch: 50 pounds of bacon, plus eggs and biscuits, provided by Chick-fil-A.

Food is an important component of most wood banks. The 30 weekly volunteers at the Greene County Wood Bank are served a sit-down lunch every Saturday, and sometimes breakfast, too, by volunteers at area churches.

Although volunteers are not in it for the recognition, at Salem Alliance Church in Oregon, three days of work is rewarded with a pair of red suspenders. The Royal Order of Red Suspenders, as their program is called, has been distributing wood for 15 years.

They work nearly every Saturday. In 2014, an extra cold winter, they delivered 356 cords to 300 families.

Tim Robbins, owner of Arbormax Tree Service, a TCIA member company based in Raleigh, North Carolina, hosts several volunteer days for the Warmth for Wake program each year. His company provides wood, major equipment and four or five employees to process wood and help with deliveries.



*The honor system is in effect at the Salem United Methodist Church wood bank in Missouri. Photo by Doug Walter.*



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*A load ready for delivery at the Warmth for Wake wood bank in Wake County, North Carolina. Photo courtesy of Wake County Human Services.*

“There are tons of benefits,” says Robbins. “It’s one of the best volunteer programs we’ve been involved with. When you deliver the wood, you know that these people would not have a source of heat if it weren’t for you.”

### Keeping safety in the forefront

On the work days he hosts, Robbins and his team model good safety habits. “Follow all your safety regulations,” he says, “and run through a brief training session with the volunteers. Most of the time it’s BYOS – bring your own saw. Only let trained people do that. Less experienced people should stack and drive the truck.”

Having a trained tree care professional at the helm helps to create a culture of safety. Melissa LeVangie, CTSP, an ISA-certified arborist who runs the Petersham Wood Bank in Massachusetts, says, “Even though most of the time I’m sawing, I’m also watching what everybody’s doing.” The program began just two years ago, with tree care professionals operating the splitters. The volunteer group size has tripled since then. “Over time, I’ve watched how those original people begin to teach others.

## Paying it Forward

Want to help a wood bank in your local area? Start with the map at [www.woodbank.org/wood-banks-directory-map/](http://www.woodbank.org/wood-banks-directory-map/).

There are several ways industry professionals can provide vital support for wood banks:

**Safety:** No one knows tree and wood safety better than this industry. Consider providing safety equipment or safety trainings to your local wood bank.

**Equipment:** You have access to commercial-grade equipment that most wood banks don’t, especially heavy-duty trucks for hauling wood. Some wood banks have a budget to reimburse your fuel costs.

**Wood:** Even if you are not in a position to donate wood yourself, you can be the bridge between homeowners and the wood banks that will process their logs for a good cause. If you buck the wood into stove-length 12- to-16-inch rounds,

all the better.

**Volunteer Opportunities:** Give your employees a paid day off to help their community. “Pay it Forward” goes a long way toward local community outreach and visibility.

**Can’t find a wood bank near you?** Consider starting your own. Denise Kissel, who coordinates the oldest wood bank in the country, offers advice that reflects how nearly every existing wood bank got started:

“Get a group of volunteers together and some wood that would otherwise end up in the chipper. And then hand it out to people.”

*For those wanting more guidance, a free guide to starting a wood bank is available from the University of Maine: [http://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/sfr\\_studentpub/1/](http://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/sfr_studentpub/1/).*



I haven’t had to say much at all,” she says. “That’s one of the nicest things about our wood bank – we foster teamwork.”

Several times a year, a group of chain-saw enthusiasts from ArboristSite.com, run by a firm based in Colorado, converges – some from several states away – to help process wood for the Interfaith Caregivers of Burnett County, Wisconsin. They always begin and end the day with a safety meeting.

Despite good intentions, wood bank accidents do happen. Many programs ask volunteers to sign waivers. Denise Kissel, a work-site coordinator for Warmth for Wake in North Carolina, says, “In 10

years of doing this, the only person who has been to the ER is me. Now I’m the don’t-do-that police.”

In Montana, at the Beaverhead Community Wood Bank Ministry, volunteer Katie Bump, a U.S. Forest Service retiree, coordinates the work parties and serves as vigilant safety czar. Program chairman Rick Hartz recalls, “If she happens to see you and you haven’t put your chaps on, she will be all over you. And when kids come out, everybody gets trained up on how to run the hydraulic wood splitter. There’s no goofing off.”

Having the proper equipment also makes a work site safer.

David Andrews of the Greene County Firewood Ministry in Tennessee notes that processing 900 loads of wood is like handling 4,500 loads, because each piece of wood is handled five times.

Bruce Wildes fundraises to improve equipment at the Cumberland Wood Bank. At first, they used his own log splitter and chain saws. He remembers, “We got to 35 cords and we were all sore backs, going to the chiropractor, volunteers dropping off. I have a friend in the equipment business who gave me a deal on a wood processor. It hitches to the end of our dump trailer – way more efficient. And it’s a lot safer, too.”



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Three days of work is rewarded with a pair of red suspenders at the Salem Alliance Church in Oregon. Photo courtesy of Salem Alliance Church.

### Meeting a need

Every wood bank has a story that keeps them going, weekend after weekend, year after year.

Denny Blodgett has run the firewood program for Interfaith Caregivers of Burnett County, Wisconsin, for 15 years. He remembers arriving with a truckload of firewood just as the homeowner was dragging his last kitchen cabinets out to the furnace to burn.

At the Greene County Wood Ministry in Tennessee, a youngster who volunteers regularly with his parents asked to hold his ninth birthday party at the woodlot. With close adult supervision, the kids split, stacked and loaded a trailer of wood, then delivered and stacked it for an elderly recipient. Instead of gifts, the birthday boy asked his friends to donate cash toward a new wheelbarrow for the woodlot.

Many programs tell stories of how wood recipients became volunteers, as a way of giving back.

In Spokane, 20 prison inmates from



Party! In Greene County Tennessee, a youngster who volunteers regularly with his parents asked to hold his ninth birthday party at the woodlot. They are shown here making the delivery to an elderly recipient. Photo courtesy of the Greene County Wood Ministry.

the Airway Heights Correctional Facility felled trees and split wood-bank logs from state land, mostly by hand. A few get to deliver the firewood, accompanied by a sergeant. Carol Wertz, who manages the program through the Spokane Neighborhood Action Program, describes a typical delivery: “They show up at the place and there’s a little old lady crying on the porch. They’re able to offer kindness to someone who needs help. When that happens to our guys, it’s profound.”

The Greene County Wood Ministry works with inmates, too – every week, 10 or 11 of them add on to the existing crew of 20. Coordinator David Andrews says, “We treat them just like any other volunteer. Some have continued to come back after they’ve gotten out. One of them has come every Saturday since he got out three or four years ago, and is now on our board of directors.”

Wood banks can help the entire community, not just the needy. Last November, a windstorm shut down the power in parts of Spokane, Washington, for two weeks. The wood bank stepped up, offering 163 cords of wood. Community members – not just low-income, but everyone – could take half a cord of wood for free.

*An open-forum session for those interested in learning more about how you can participate in a wood bank is in the works for TCI EXPO in Baltimore this fall. Check the TCI EXPO webpage, at [www.tcia.org/events](http://www.tcia.org/events), which will be updated by the end of June, for details. For more on wood banks, visit [www.woodbank.org/wood-banks-directory-map/](http://www.woodbank.org/wood-banks-directory-map/). 🌲*

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