

HOW TO START A

COMMUNITY FRIDGE

Courtesy of Hope Fridge

Fox Cities, Wisconsin

Written By TJ Hobbs (Hope Fridge Co-Founder), Molly Moon

(Hope Fridge Co-Founder) & Madeleine Knowles-Johnson

Edited & Designed By Madeleine Knowles-Johnson

(Hope Fridge Volunteer)

First Edition, January 2026

**HOPE
FRIDGE**

Take What You Need, Leave What You Can

TABLE OF CONTENTS

HOW TO START A COMMUNITY FRIDGE

Recommended Resources.....	1
Defining Mutual Aid.....	2
Getting Started Overview.....	3
How to Choose a Host Site	4
Budget Planning	5
How to Sustain the Fridge	6-7
FAQ	8-10
Build Plans	11-19
Photo Gallery	20

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES:

1. **"Mutual Aid - Building Solidarity During This Crisis and the Next"** book by Dean Spade
2. **Building Capacity for Mutual Aid Groups (Workshop 1):** No Masters, No Flakes! | Barnard Center for Research on Women
3. **Building Capacity for Mutual Aid Groups (Workshop 2):** Decision-Making - YouTube, (as well as Workshop 3 & 4)
4. **HopeFridge.com**
5. **TheLoveFridge.com**
6. FDA Food Safety <https://www.fda.gov/consumers/consumer-updates/are-you-storing-food-safely>

Note: There are as many ways to start and maintain a community fridge as there are communities.

This booklet shares suggestions and ideas, not legal advice.

DEFINING MUTUAL AID

Mutual aid is the backbone of any community fridge, and keeping the key aspects of mutual aid at the heart of your project will help you stay organized and community-minded.

According to "Mutual Aid, Building Solidarity During This Crisis (And The Next)" by Dean Spade, **"mutual aid is the radical act of caring for each other while working to change the world. Mutual aid is collective coordination to meet each other's needs, usually from an awareness that the systems we have in place are not going to meet them. Those systems, in fact, have often created the crisis, or are making things worse. There is nothing new about mutual aid—people have worked together to survive for all of human history. Mutual aid projects expose the reality that people do not have what they need and propose that we address this injustice together."**

Mutual aid emphasizes **solidarity instead of charity**. Where charity inherently involves hierarchy and power dynamics, mutual aid does not. Instead, it uses the **strength of the community** to take a **"neighbors helping neighbors"** approach in addressing shared needs and circumstances.

As a mutual aid project, Hope Fridge aims to feed people, yes, but also to **mobilize people, to expand solidarity, unity, and community, to ever-expand our commitment to justice when faced with the complex realities of injustice, to uplift marginalized communities, and to continue to help build and sustain social movements for systemic change**. We hope your community fridge can do the same!

GETTING STARTED: WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

If you're privileged with the time, energy, and capacity to help organize a community fridge in your community, here are some ways to help make it happen:

 **Do your research.** Look up other community fridges across the country and see what their experiences have been like (there are TONS on Instagram, for example!) What do you like about those community fridges? Learn about **what is already succeeding in other communities** and apply those lessons to your own. Throughout this text, you'll find examples from Hope Fridge about how it got started.

 **Grow your team and make plans together!** Who will be your host site (with ample parking in an accessible location)? Who are your builders? What will your fridge be named? Who will be on your volunteer team? Your social media team? Your fundraising team and method (Givebuttr, GoFundMe, et al)? **There is no community fridge without LOTS of people working together** in many different ways, so be a connector and empower people to get involved!

 **The only permission needed is that of your host site!** A community fridge needs commitment, dedication, and community support to succeed—not government approval. (Would you ask permission before inviting your friends over for a meal? Of course not. Same energy here!)

 **Ask for help with questions when you get stuck.** Many community fridge projects can answer any questions you have, but others may be at capacity and unable to respond. If one community fridge project doesn't respond or is unavailable, ask/DM another until you find a community fridge (or another trusted source) to help answer your questions.

 **Be open with and regularly update your community with current progress,** including any challenges or needs. Your community will appreciate the transparency and feel empowered to share their unique ideas and connections to help make this project a reality. At every stage, **ask your community for what you need help with next**—and be specific!

 **No need to reinvent the wheel!** Use what has worked well in other communities. On the following pages, you'll find Hope Fridge's build plans to use for your own community fridge and pantry.

We take care of each other, we keep us safe, and we will keep us fed! Keep going!

HOW TO CHOOSE A HOST SITE

Finding the right home for your community fridge is crucial to ensure it serves your community in the most effective way possible. **Your location should be welcoming, safe, and easily accessible. Remember, community fridges don't exist to monitor or police our communities. They exist to feed our communities.** Here are our recommendations for choosing a host:

Use Community Connections

- Ask around on social media or your personal network to find a host site—use the tools you already have at your disposal for networking!
- **Consider wheelchair accessibility** and choose a site with a path to the fridge and pantry that allows wheelchairs to navigate easily.
- Find a host site and a host who is **intentionally welcoming** to the most marginalized (ideally, the host is LGBTQIA2S+ inclusive, actively anti-racist, and not located in a religious or government building, etc.).
 - This will help ensure that folks who most need help can access it safely.

Location, Location, Location!

- Aim for local food deserts.
- Try to find a site close to public transportation, especially a bus station or stop.
 - **Check your city ordinances before building to ensure your fridge is an appropriate distance back from the sidewalk.**

Talking to Your Potential Host

- Interview potential hosts before partnering—it's a big commitment!
- Here are some questions to ask your potential host:
 - "Are you okay with people visiting your property in the middle of the night 24/7/365 to drop off or pick up donations?"
 - "Do you have any plans to move in the next few years?"
 - **"Do you understand why we will not police the fridges, and do you agree not to monitor who is using this fridge or how often?"**
 - "Are you comfortable donating the cost of powering an outdoor fridge? (estimated \$120-200 annually)."
- ***Note: Hosts do NOT need to maintain the fridges! In fact, we recommend they don't to prevent host burnout. We have volunteers for that!***

COMMUNITY FRIDGE BUILD BUDGET

This is an example budget that Hope Fridge used to build its community fridges in the Fox Cities, Wisconsin. (This budget is based on the build plans we kindly received from The Love Fridge in Chicago and later updated to reflect our builder's tastes). Prices for may vary by region.

Remember, you can fundraise and find generous donors to help with the costs associated with starting and maintaining a community fridge. It costs zero dollars to start planning!

Green-Treated Wood & Building Labor

■ \$600 - 800

Note: Try to find volunteer builders/donated labor.

Sheet Metal Roof (optional).

■ \$0 - \$100

Note: Metal and other non-porous materials are ideal for roofing because they last longer.

Paint

■ \$0 - \$200

Note: Try to find a local volunteer painter.

Totes, On-Site Garbage Bin & Anti-Tear Trash Bags

■ \$100 - 160

Notes: Plastic totes protect pantry donations from nature and the elements. Establish a place to empty the on-site garbage bin daily and as needed. Keep thick anti-tear construction trash bags with volunteers and at the bottom of the bin.

Fridge

■ \$0 - 700

Notes: You'll want to buy a new one or have a new one donated to ensure its longevity. Ensure the fridge is compatible with a GFI outlet. Most fridges are, but some are not (check the back/on the power cord for this information).

Electrical

■ \$0-1600

Notes: Outdoor GFI outlet installation is necessary to power the fridge outdoors for safety, effectiveness, and to meet city codes/ordinances. See if any local electricians would be willing to donate/write off installation.

Accessible Walkway and Strong Foundation:

■ \$0 - 1500

Notes: This could be bricks, stone, or concrete. A grass walkway will quickly turn to mud, so we strongly advise laying bricks, stone, or concrete before opening your fridge. A professional local landscaping company may be willing to donate labor and materials!

HOW TO SUSTAIN THE FRIDGE THROUGH COMMUNITY CARE

A community fridge takes just that—a community to care for and maintain it. **It takes shared responsibility, dedication, and ongoing commitment.** Here are some common questions and practical answers to help sustain your fridge through community care:

What level of commitment is required to start and maintain a community fridge?

Building a community fridge takes a willingness to start, but it also requires **ongoing dedication to improving the lives of marginalized people**, with a special focus on food security. Enthusiasm, dedication, and community collaboration are necessary to complete this project and maintain the fridge over time successfully.

How long does it take to get a community fridge up and running?

This project will move as quickly or slowly as your community decides.

What volunteer roles are required to maintain the fridge?

The kindness of friends and community volunteers keeps a community fridge running. You will need:

1. Multiple admins/managers to help with normal operations (including quickly shoveling and salting the walkway as needed)
2. Daily volunteer cleaners/organizers (removing expired food and on-site trash, etc.)
3. Regular food donors (connect with local stores, restaurants, and social groups who may want to donate regularly)
4. Outreach volunteers (people who can connect with the local stores and restaurants about food and supply donations)

Note: Community fridges are a form of mutual aid. There is no hierarchy among roles.

How can volunteers communicate?

Open communication among volunteers is helpful. Use **group chats and social media messaging** to update each other about needs and completed tasks. SignUp.com is another way to help track volunteers.

You can set up social media pages for your fridge to post updates and ask for help from the community (don't forget to give your fridge an inviting name!). Building a simple website that includes food safety and donation guidelines, a donation portal, a sign-up sheet for volunteers and donors, and a mission statement is also a great idea to help engage your community in the fridge.

HOW TO SUSTAIN THE FRIDGE THROUGH COMMUNITY CARE

Who pays for the maintenance of the fridge?

The ongoing costs of a community fridge are paid for by community donors.

Here's a rough idea of what to expect for a community fridge's ongoing expenses:

- Replacing pantry bins regularly
 - Folks without a place to stay or living in a vehicle often take our pantry bins to help keep their belongings organized and dry; we are happy to help.
- Replacing outdoor string lights
 - Bulbs will occasionally burn out every few weeks and need to be replaced
- Replacing fridge and freezer thermometers (they tend to go missing more often than you'd expect!)
- Thick construction garbage bags for the on-site garbage bin
 - The on-site garbage will need to be checked and emptied at least daily by community volunteers.
 - Leaving garbage bags in the bin works well until those go missing. Please make sure your regular volunteers also have their own supply of garbage bags with them.
- Occasionally replacing an on-site garbage bin.
- Filling the fridge as often as possible!

Sites like GiveButter make it easy to collect and track donations and expenses. Your donation portal can be linked to your website, and you can ask for donations through social media, email, and in-person. It's also beneficial to establish partnerships with local bakeries, restaurants, and grocery stores. Tell them about your fridge's mission and ask for regular donations of excess goods. These partnerships will help build community support and sustainability!

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Hope Fridge's website has an entire page dedicated to frequently asked questions that we've received from community members. We've compiled them here and paired them with commonly asked questions about general community fridge maintenance:

What is a community fridge?

A community fridge is a form of mutual aid that provides fresh food and hygiene products to anyone in need at any time, **with no questions asked**. A community fridge is an emergency service run by the community, for the community. **A community fridge is not a charity.**

A community fridge has **no paid staff/employees, and they have no paid volunteers**. Everyone works together to ensure that a community fridge is kept safe, clean, and as full as possible of fresh food and hygiene supplies.

A community fridge helps improve food security for our neighbors while reducing food waste. Everyone is welcome to help keep our fridges safe and full!

Are community fridges food pantries?

Community fridges are not food pantries. They're run by community volunteers who strive to ensure that **fresh, delicious food, as well as new personal hygiene supplies, are available free of charge to anyone who needs them, at any time of day, without invasive personal questions, limits, or restrictions**. This means community fridges may be full of food one minute and empty the next.

Does a community fridge have to be a 501(c)(3) or nonprofit?

No.

Is there a limit to how often someone can visit a community fridge or how much they can take?

Nope! Anyone can visit a community fridge and take whatever they need to help themselves or their friends and family at any time. Take what you need, leave what you can, and please leave it cleaner than you found it. **Remember, community fridges don't exist to monitor or police our communities. They exist to feed our communities.**

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What guidelines do you recommend outlining for people who want to donate?

Everyone deserves healthy, safe, fresh, and non-expired food. Please ask yourself, before donating, whether this food is something you would eat or give to a loved one based on its quality. If not, please don't donate it. Everyone deserves food that makes them feel good!

For homemade meals, please wash your hands, wear a hairnet/beard-net, and follow basic food safety guidelines. All ingredients must be labeled and include the date made. Food made in restaurants or in commercial kitchens specifically for donation must also be labeled.

We do not accept donations of expired or opened foods, alcohol, raw meat or fish, raw (unpasteurized) dairy products or eggs, half-eaten leftovers, unlabeled multi-ingredient foods, canned goods without easy-open lids (not everyone has access to can openers), over-the-counter or RX medications, anything in glass containers, or religious/church recruitment materials.

Our fridge and pantry welcome properly labeled and prepared ready-to-go meals, sandwiches, fruit juices, water, sports drinks, fresh produce, pastries, baked goods, bread, pasteurized eggs and dairy products, cured meats, lunchables, granola bars, fruit snacks, frozen dinners, cooking oils, and spices.

We kindly ask that people refrain from donating clothes, shoes, books, and other items to our community fridges. Please direct those donations to a local thrift store instead!

What other resources can we recommend to people when the fridge is empty?

The FoodFinder app or website (www.FoodFinder.us) is a helpful way to find local food pantries in your area. When you enter your zip code, they list nearby food pantry locations, hours, and any requirements.

Do outdoor community fridges face nature-related challenges?

Yes, but nothing we can't work through!

Ensure that your fridge is housed in a sturdy, reliable structure (see enclosed build plans) with proper storage (plastic totes with lids on pantry shelves work well for this) to help avoid many nature-related challenges, such as rodents and rain.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

If you live in a region with drastic seasonal temperature changes, you may run into weather-related challenges. Place a reliable thermometer in both the fridge and freezer, and have volunteers check them multiple times a day to ensure safe temperatures.

Depending on your climate, fridge and freezer temperatures may stay stable throughout the cooler months. Many community fridges function well outdoors in winter, but performance varies by model. Continue to monitor temperatures closely.

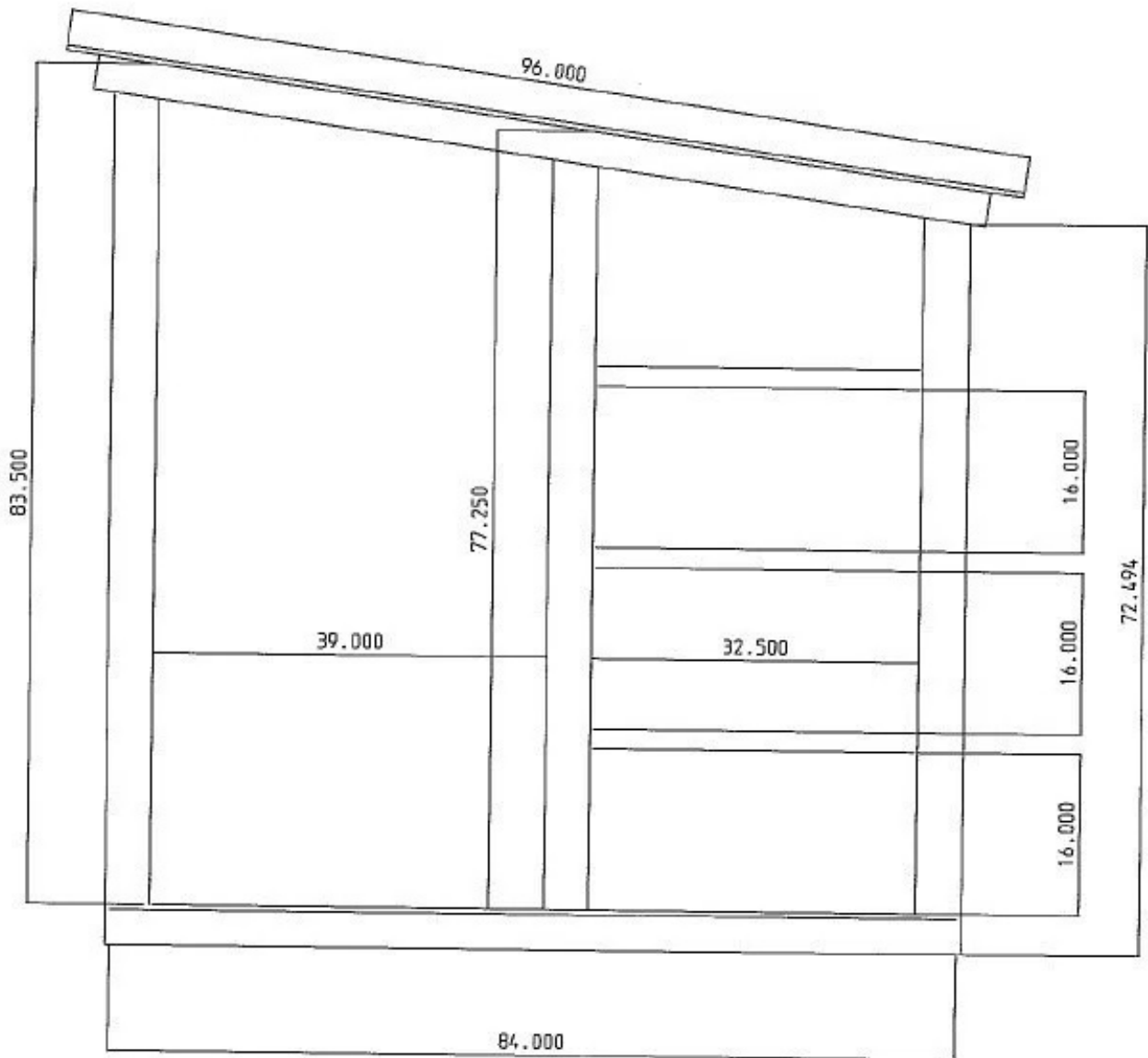
If your fridge temperature rises above 39°F in winter (common causes include frequent donations of hot foods, frequent door openings, unplugging, blocked airflow, frost buildup, or mechanical issues), have a clear protocol for responding quickly to prevent foodborne illness.

During very hot weather, your fridge may be unable to maintain safe temperatures for perishable foods. If the fridge is above 39°F or the freezer is above -1°F, have a protocol in place to shift the types of donations you accept.

What kinds of protocols and procedures should we have in place for our fridge?

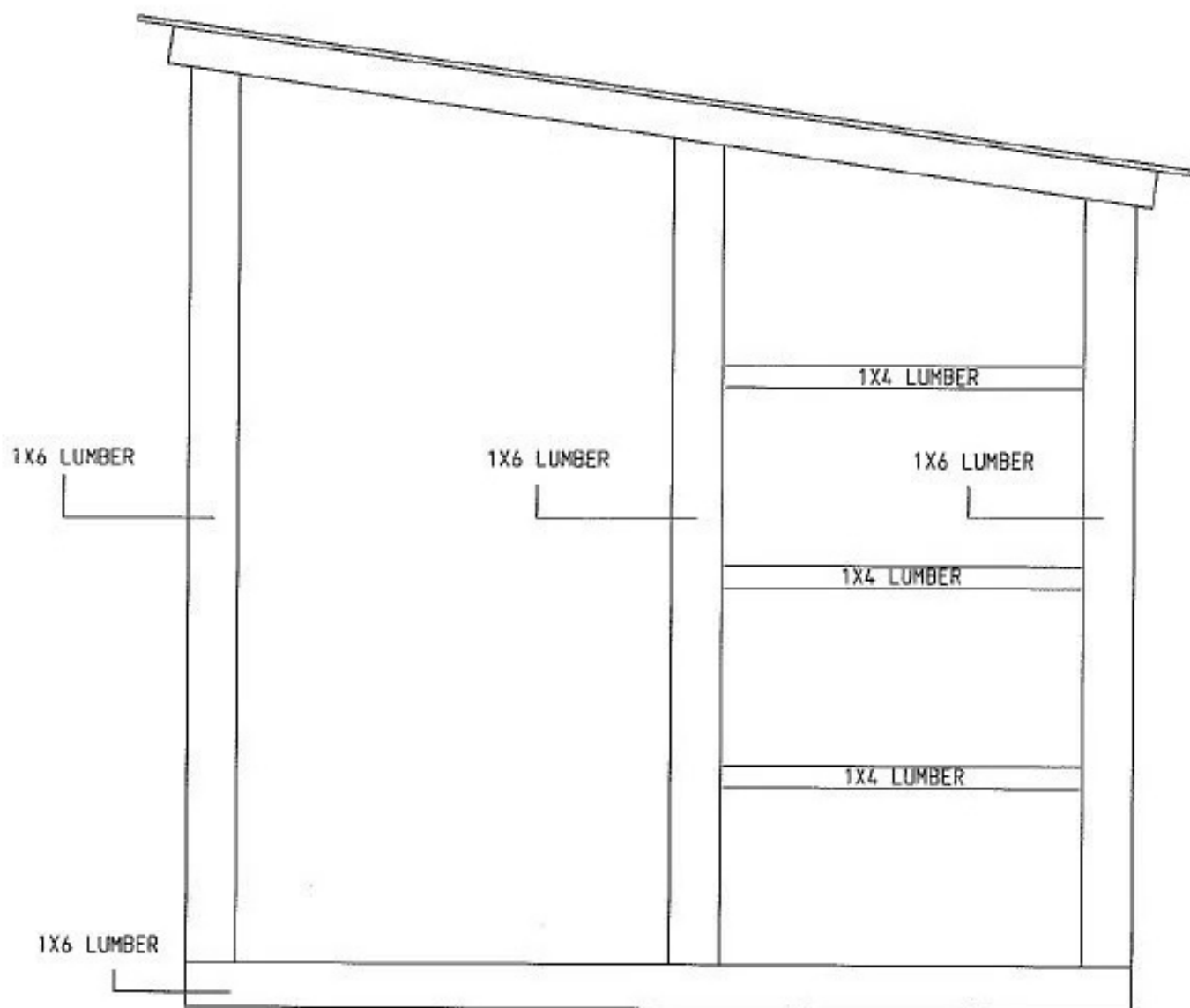
Your team should decide on the protocols appropriate for your fridge, but we strongly recommend developing internal written guidelines, procedures, and protocols for health and safety, communication and social media, finances, and volunteers.

BUILD PLANS - ENTIRE STRUCTURE

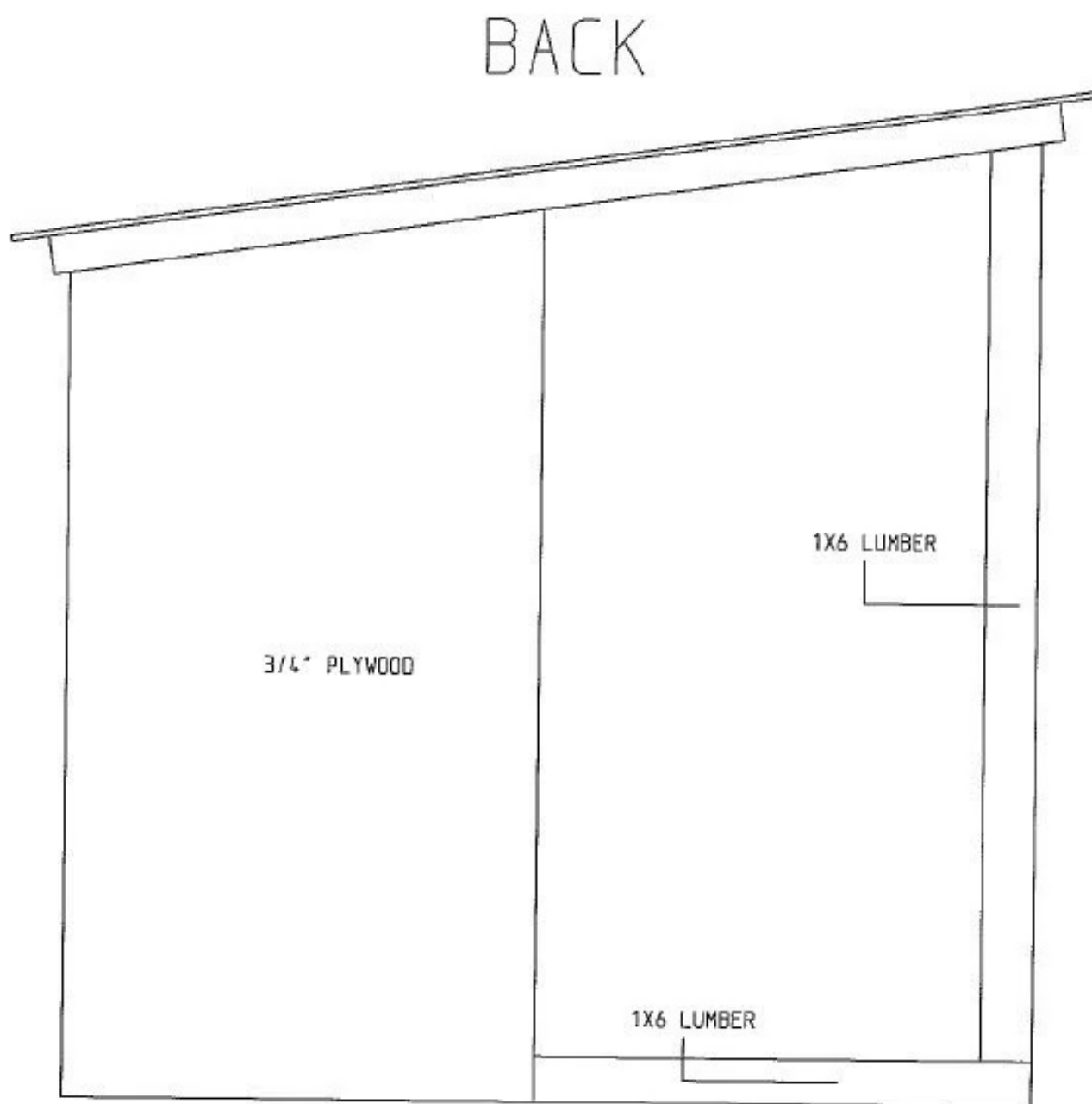


BUILD PLANS - FRONT OF STRUCTURE

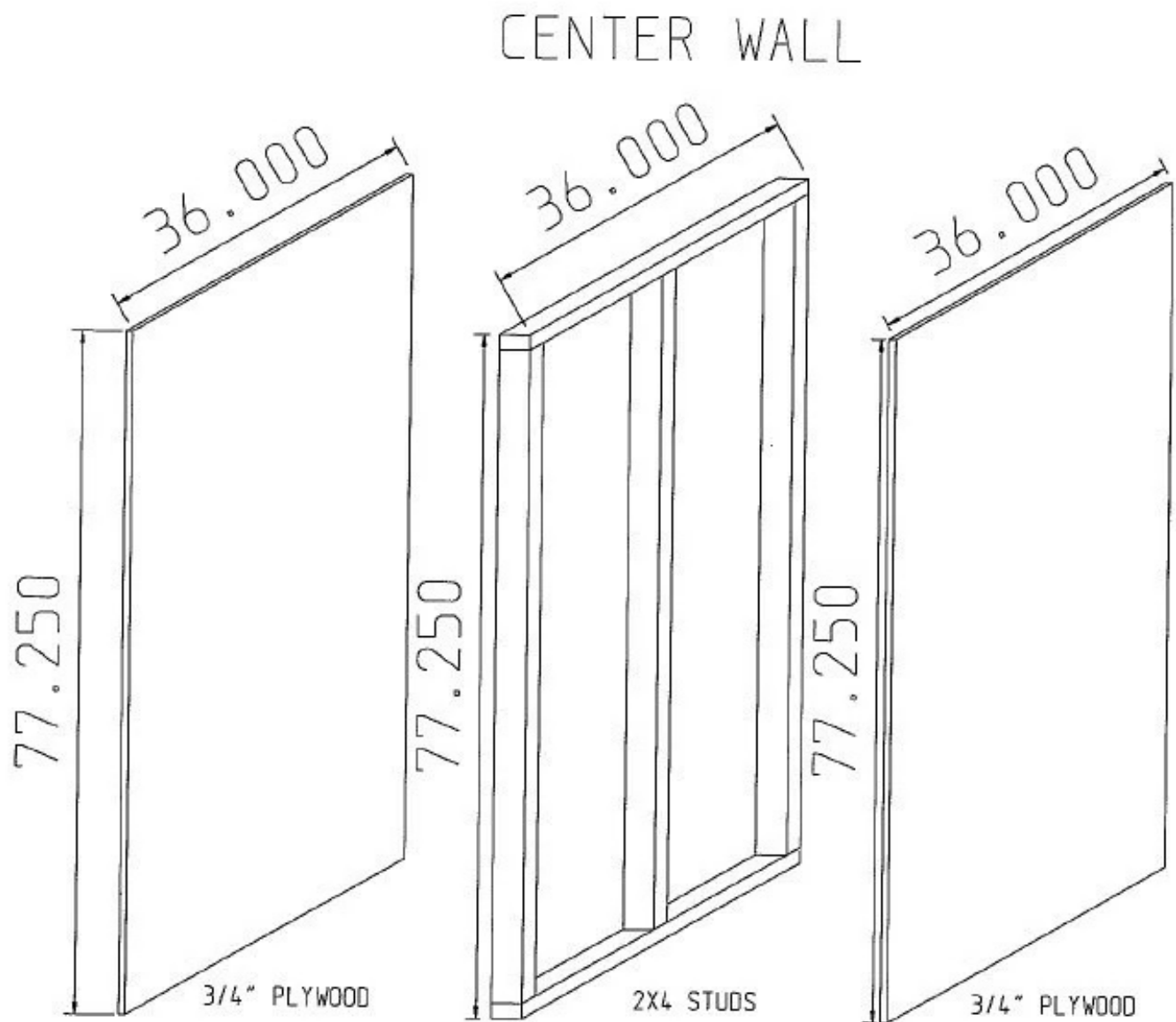
FRONT



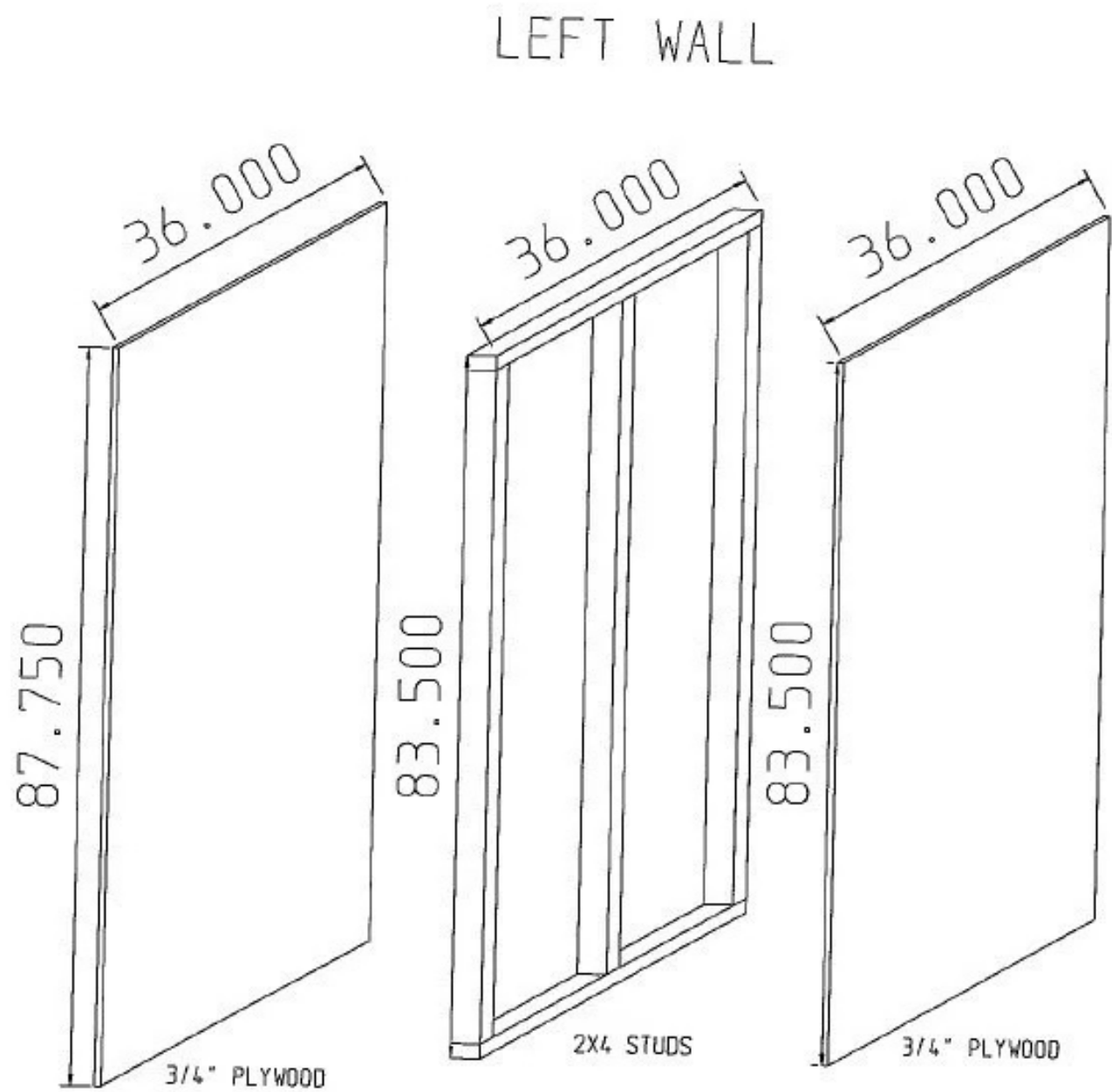
BUILD PLANS - BACK OF STRUCTURE



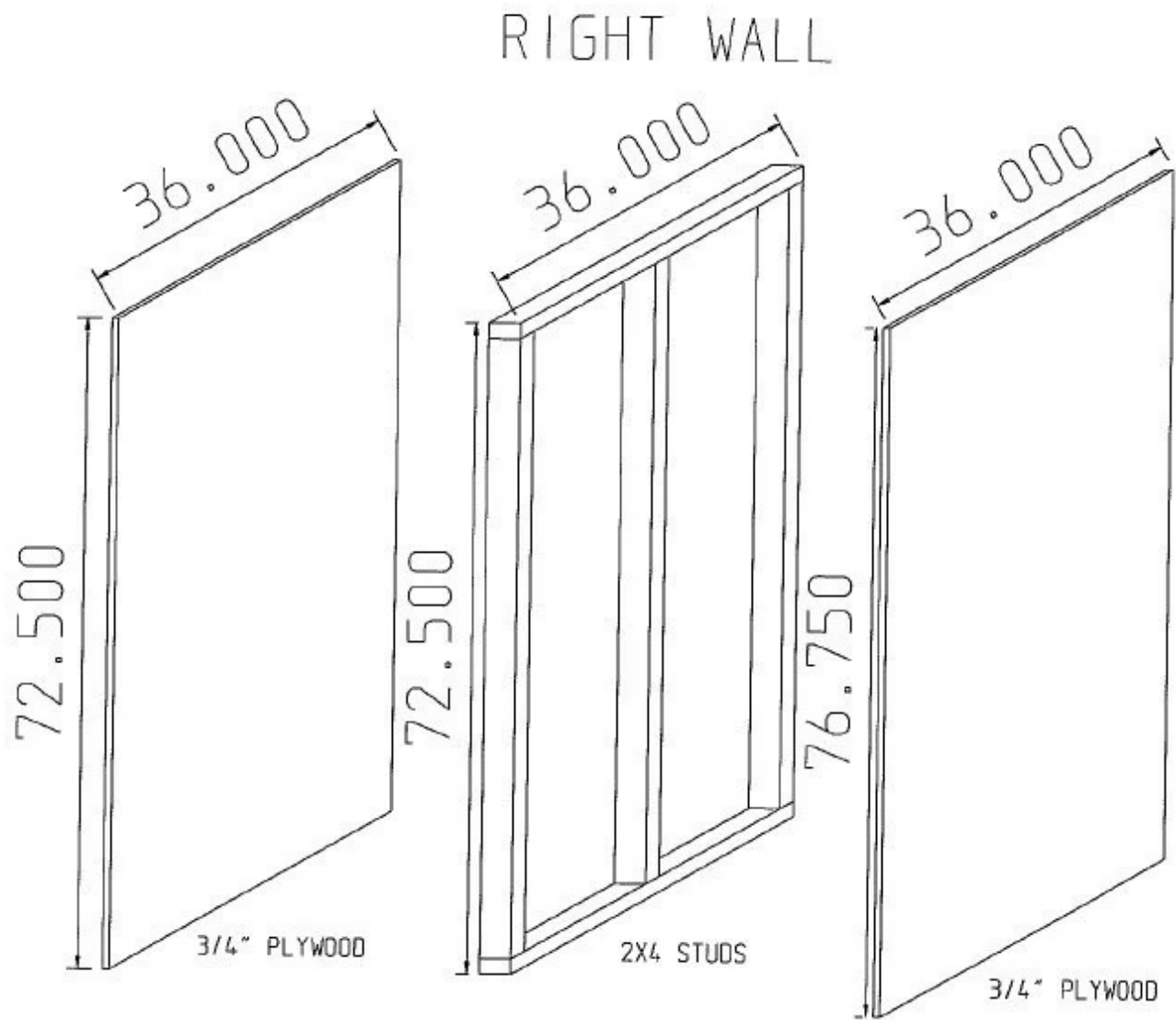
BUILD PLANS - CENTER WALL



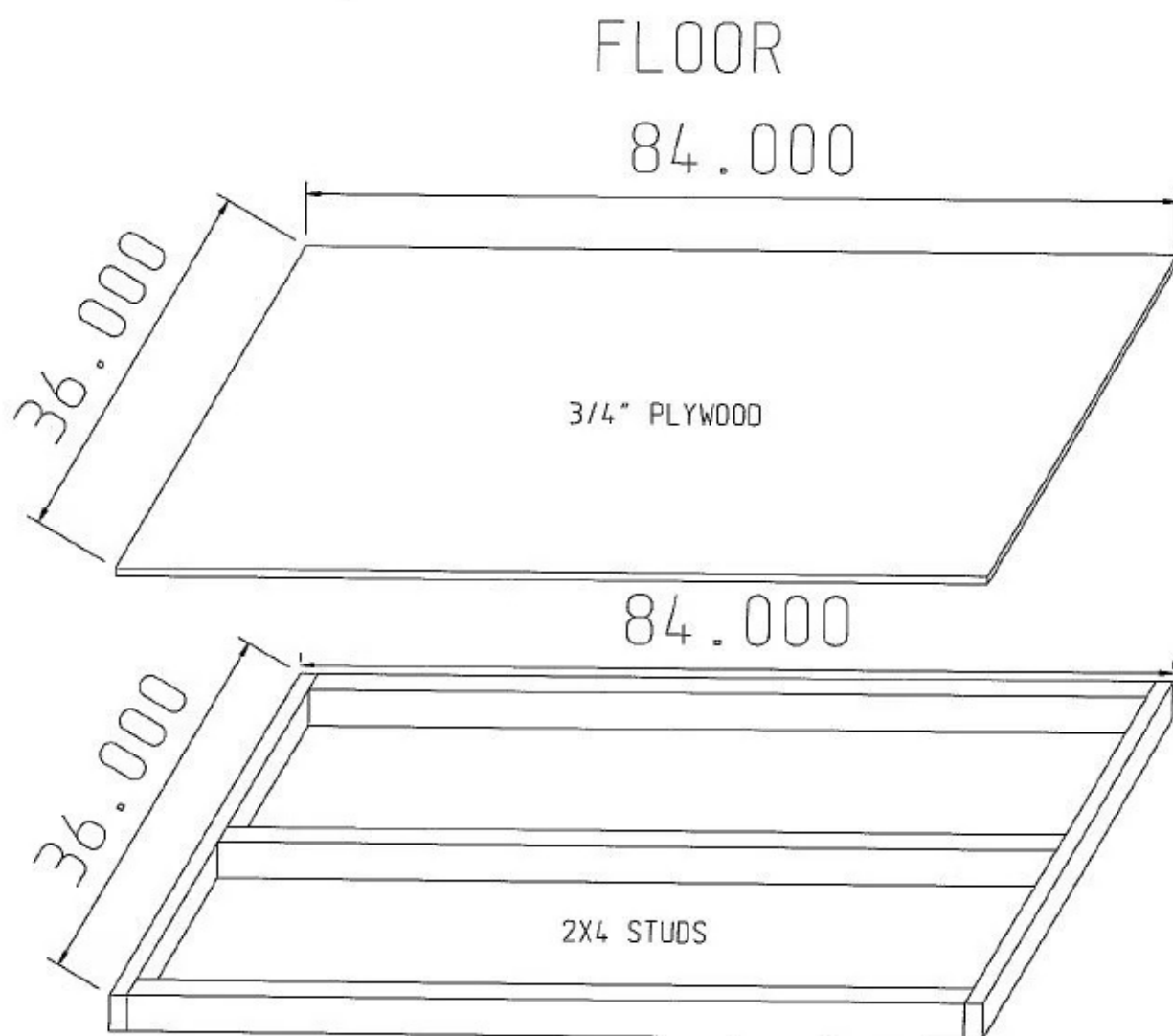
BUILD PLANS - LEFT WALL



BUILD PLANS - RIGHT WALL

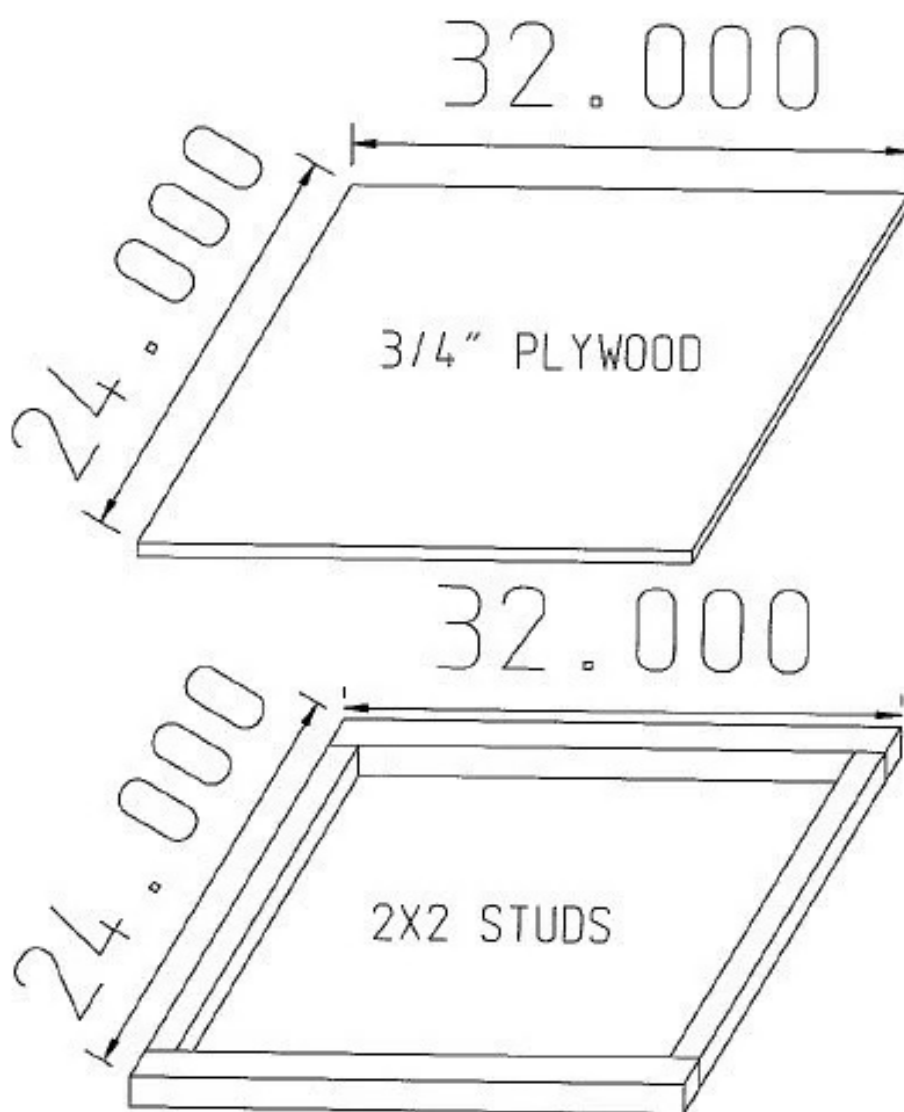


BUILD PLANS - FLOOR

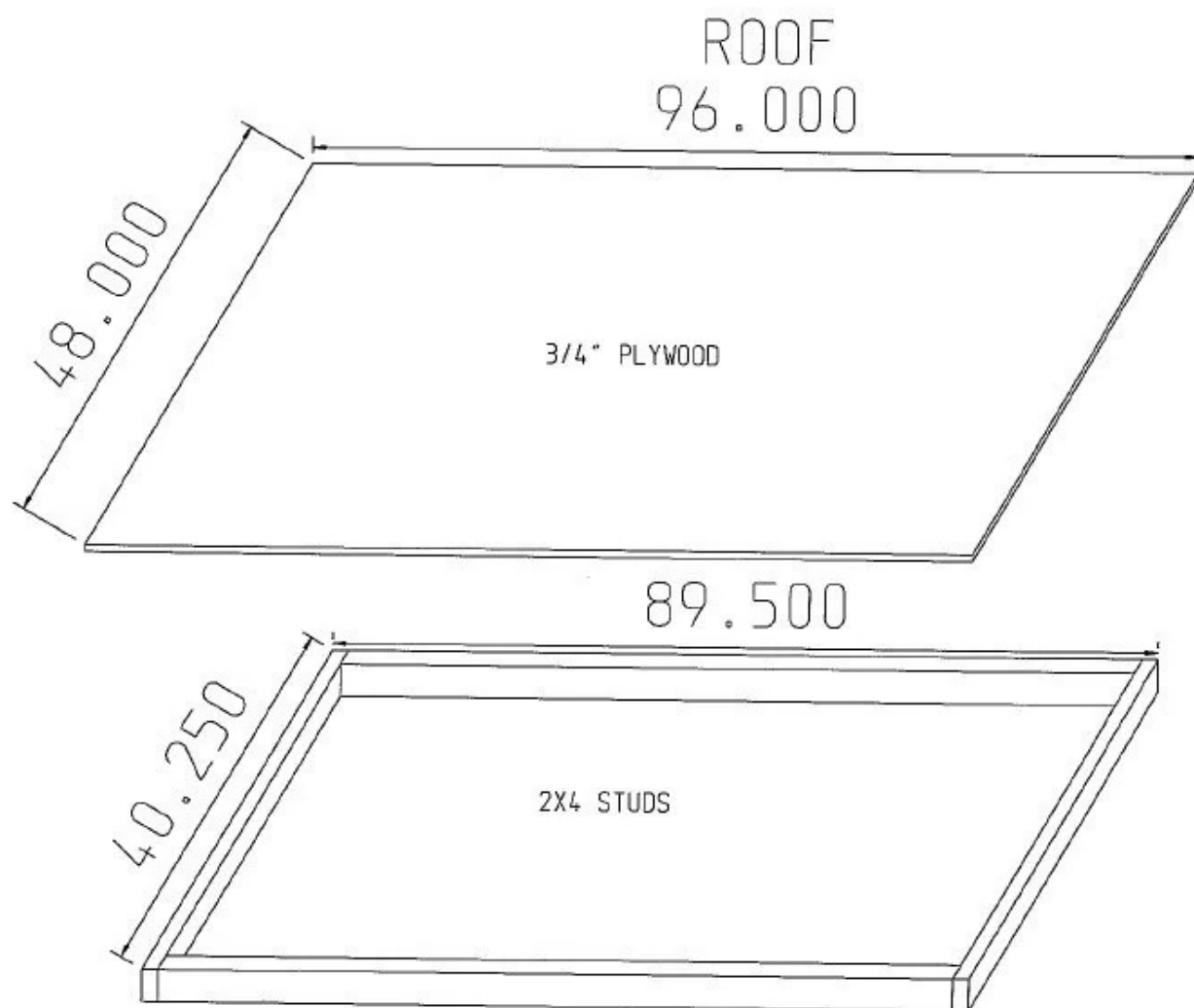


BUILD PLANS - SHELVES

SHELVES X3



BUILD PLANS - ROOF



PHOTOS OF HOPE FRIDGE LOCATIONS

Here are a couple of photos of Hope Fridge locations from over the years. Note the lighting, terrain, surroundings, and overall accessibility of the fridges and pantries. We hope you can take inspiration from Hope Fridge and the other wonderful community fridges across the country.

**Remember: We take care of each other, we keep us safe, and we will keep us fed!
Keep going!**

