

Innovation in Food Access Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Government agencies, nonprofit organizations, and volunteer networks are undertaking innovative efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure food access by vulnerable populations. By highlighting strategies that are unfolding in real time, this brief shares an array of potential approaches for private, public, and nonprofit stakeholders to use in deploying their resources.

Strengthening Emergency Food Systems

One sector especially quick to respond to the pressures created by the pandemic has been the nonprofit emergency food safety net. Amid rising unemployment and the closure of nutrition support sites like school cafeterias, demand for food support through nonprofit safety nets has spiked, and food pantries and food banks are experiencing unprecedented increases in volume.¹

KEY FINDINGS



Government, nonprofit, retail, and volunteer emergency food system responses to the COVID-19 pandemic have been innovative, including new dissemination models plus modifications and expansions of pre-existing programs.



Emergency food system responses have focused on enhancing accessibility, particularly for elderly populations, and on reducing the need for in-person contact.



Drive-through pickup is an especially prevalent modification to emergency and nonemergency food systems; often higher-volume distributions reduce the frequency of contact between distributors and clients.



Ensuring that states continue to make use of allowable administrative flexibility for federal nutrition programs is especially important moving forward.

TABLE 1. EMERGENCY FOOD SYSTEM RESPONSES TO COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Model	Components
Drive-through or curbside food pantry pickup	Prepackaged boxes of food are placed in cars, ² or clients can select from a list of available items that are then collected and brought outside by workers ³
Mobile food pantries	Trucks carrying prepacked food travel to community locations more accessible than the usual food pantry ⁴
Informal food pantries	Freestanding outdoor cupboards are set up on public or private properties; they are available to anyone, open at all hours, and operate with a “take what you need, give what you can” basis; ⁵ they include “Blessings Boxes” ⁶ and “Little Free Pantries” ⁷
Modified Meals-on-Wheels	Seniors receive delivery of multiple meals (some frozen) at once, ⁸ reducing the daily contact required under usual model
Grab-and-go senior meals	Replacing congregate meals, these models provide food to seniors who may not meet the criteria for home delivery ⁹
Restaurant-delivered meals	Local governments pair older adults and other eligible individuals unable to cook with underutilized restaurants ¹⁰

Table 1 shows some of the varied responses by these emergency food systems to the jump in demand that is occurring at a time of increased social distancing.

Even in normal times, food pantries are responsive to the characteristics and needs of their communities, and this is true of pandemic responses too. Dissemination via prepackaged boxes allows for bulk distribution, while the option to make selections and then pick them up curbside can be useful in communities with special dietary needs. Mobile food pantries may be especially useful for reaching those with transportation limitations, including people

who once relied on now-closed public transit or those in very rural places. Sometimes mobile pantries are paired with other services, like COVID-19 testing.¹¹

To support increased levels of need, the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) designated \$400 million in funding for the Emergency Food Assistance Program to support food banks.¹² In part to ease supply pressures, in mid-April the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) announced it would attempt to address the mismatch between the glut of unharvested and unsold farm food and the food needs of families by creating the Farmers to Families Food Box program, which partners with local distributors to purchase food from farmers, repackaging it into family-sized boxes, and distribute it to food pantries and other nonprofits for dissemination.¹³ More than \$1.2 billion in contract awards were announced May 8, 2020,¹⁴ with purchases expected to begin in mid-May.¹⁵ FFCRA also designated \$250 million to support senior nutrition programs,¹⁶ and the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act¹⁷ designated \$500 million to bolster resources for especially high-risk populations.

Rapidly Shifting School Meal Distribution Plans

With school closures in effect, individual districts and child-serving nonprofits have had to rapidly adjust their meal distribution systems to ensure that students remain fed. Specific strategies for doing so are listed in Table 2.

The changes to school meal delivery systems, which have been implemented quickly and widely, were aided by the FFCRA, which allowed the USDA to loosen requirements

TABLE 2. CHILD NUTRITION SYSTEM RESPONSES TO COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Model	Components
Bus-stop or home delivery	Students are delivered school meals, sometimes in weekly batches, to their usual bus stops or their homes ¹⁸
Grab-and-go meal pickup	Meals are available for pickup at a central location, usually the school, at designated times; families are encouraged to practice social distancing at pickup ¹⁹
Weekend meal services	Nonprofits continue to feed students outside of school hours by connecting with school distribution efforts to provide prepacked bags of food for consumption over the weekend ²⁰

around school meal components and delivery settings. Many of these strategies are expected to continue into summer; in March, the Food and Nutrition Service began approving waivers to enable sponsors of the Summer Food Service Program and the National School Lunch Program Seamless Summer Option to serve meals in a noncongregate setting.²¹ However, preparing and delivering meals under these new models is expensive for schools, especially since reaching all eligible students is a challenge and schools (or other sponsors, if a summer program)²² are reimbursed on a per-meal-served basis, with no dedicated reimbursements to account for new delivery costs. Some administrators have expressed concerns about resulting budget shortfalls, which are likely to materialize in the next school year when demand for free and reduced-price lunch may continue to rise.²³

Increasing Resources for Individuals' Food Spending

In addition to bolstering resources for emergency food and school nutrition, the FFCRA also put in place several administrative flexibilities related to nutrition programs that aim to make more food-spending money available to consumers. These flexibilities are summarized in Table 3.

Given the responsiveness of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) to economic downturns, serving more low-income households during a downturn and fewer during times of expansion,²⁸ changes to the program under the FFCRA are especially important. Emergency allotments to SNAP households provide low-income families with immediate food purchasing power and free up household resources for other necessities.

TABLE 3. STRATEGIES FOR INCREASING FOOD SPENDING CAPACITY IN RESPONSES TO COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Model	Components
SNAP emergency allotments	States can provide households with temporary benefits up to the monthly maximum amount ²⁴
SNAP administrative changes	Time limits on eligibility for unemployed and underemployed recipients are suspended; states have flexibility in certification processes ²⁵
Pandemic EBT	The value of lost school meals is recouped through electronic benefit transfer allocations for families ²⁶
Grocery store vouchers	Families receive gift cards or vouchers from local government or nonprofit agencies ²⁷

Administrative changes easing requirements around reporting, certification, and in-person interviews and signatures support consistency of access in this unprecedented time while also conserving state administrative resources and reducing the need for in-person contact between caseworkers and clients.

Importantly, nonfederal efforts to increase families' food budgets are also in play. For instance, Seattle, WA provided \$800 grocery store vouchers to 6,000 low-income families identified through their enrollment in existing city child care subsidy and food assistance programs; the voucher is funded through the city's soda tax revenue.²⁹ Other nonprofit agencies have also provided direct grocery store voucher assistance, including through the United Way.³⁰

Innovating Food Acquisition Strategies

Unlike in prior economic downturns, meeting food needs is not limited to supplementing food purchasing power or ensuring sufficient charitable donations. In the pandemic context, it has also been key to alter food acquisition channels to comply with social distancing regulations and to address access issues for those at elevated risk of infection. Some of these strategies are listed in Table 4.

Perhaps the most visible shifts have been among retail grocers, who along with implementing new in-store practices to reduce infection³⁴ are also under pressure to offer consumer options that limit face-to-face contact, including online ordering, delivery, and curbside pickup. While some larger retailers benefit from having these offerings already in place, crafting infrastructure for these services can pose a challenge for small stores or rural retailers, particularly those services that rely on access to broadband.³⁵ Where in-store safety practices are not enough and remote shopping is not an option, grocery delivery is offered by many volunteer networks, sometimes called mutual aid groups, organized in individual communities. These efforts have been coordinated via social media, door-to-door dissemination of fliers, or existing nonprofit relationships.

To meet the challenges of in-person grocery shopping and to address the complications that have arisen in traditional food distribution chains, some food producers have turned to direct-to-consumer efforts. These include "boat-to-table" initiatives from local fishermen,³⁶ new strategies from greenhouse growers,³⁷ and expanded farm stand offerings. Reuters reports that farmers have seen an increased demand for home delivery, especially in places

where larger grocery delivery services are unavailable or goods are out of stock.³⁸ By selling directly to consumers, local producers can recoup some of the losses that might be sustained from having fewer wholesale buyers, although this option is unlikely to help mid-size and larger farmers, who are not equipped to package and distribute directly to consumers.³⁹

How Policy Can Continue Supporting Access

As the pandemic continues to affect families' economic well-being, food access is likely to remain an important challenge. One immediate action for states to take is to utilize the flexibility afforded under USDA program options and waivers, including relaxing administrative rules around SNAP and applying to operate a Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) program.⁴⁰ The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities notes, however, that there is substantial variation in states' uptake of these waivers and options, with all states opting to provide SNAP recipients with an emergency allotment, many states adjusting requirements around certification and reporting, and several states applying to run Pandemic EBT programs.⁴¹

In addition to adjustments to existing programs, a pilot program that allows SNAP users to shop online is underway now, with the pressures of the pandemic expediting the planned rollout into additional states.⁴² Although the extent of the pandemic's toll on unemployment and household income is not yet clear, it is possible that additional flexibilities around SNAP benefit levels and eligibility may be

TABLE 4. FOOD ACQUISITION SYSTEM RESPONSES TO COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Model	Components
Social distancing in grocery settings	Reduced stores capacities; dedicated hours for vulnerable shoppers; aisle closures and markers; ³¹ expanded online ordering, delivery, and curbside pickup
Mutual aid groups ³²	Errands run for vulnerable populations by local volunteer networks; grocery delivery for seniors often included ³³
Direct-to-consumer sales	Food producers sell directly to consumers; producers receive income, consumers allowed to shop in a less-populated setting

relevant for supporting food access, as will be additional federal allocations for other nutrition programs like the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, commonly known as WIC.

About the Author

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