



Food Security Council

Initial Report:
COVID-19 Findings and Recommendations

October 29
2020

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Non-Voting Members, each nominated from members of the legislature:

Senator Kevin Daley, nominee of the Senate Majority Leader.

Representative Pauline Wendzel, nominee of the Speaker of the House.

Senator Winnie Brinks, nominee of the Senate Minority Leader.

Representative Angela Witwer, nominee of the House Minority Leader.

Executive Summary

The Food Security Council

The **24-MEMBER FOOD SECURITY COUNCIL (FSC)** between its inception in August 2020 and October 2020:

- invited expert testimony from **10 SUBJECT MATTER EXPERTS** from across the state
- to present in **5 PUBLIC FSC MEETINGS**
- as well as solicited survey responses from **140 FOOD-RELATED STAKEHOLDERS** across Michigan
- to create and endorse **16 RECOMMENDATIONS** for Governor Whitmer to inform the state's response to a potential second wave of COVID-19 or future public health emergency.

Summary of Findings Related to COVID-19

FOOD SUPPLY REMAINED PLENTIFUL, BUT PANIC BUYING AND NEED FOR RE-PACKAGING POSED CHALLENGES.

Ample food existed in the food supply chain in Michigan throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, but consumer panic buying created an environment where retailers were constantly restocking empty shelves, putting pressure on the food supply chain that affected other sectors, such as charitable food supply. The closure of restaurants and congregate feeding sites left some food supply meant for commercial use unusable without re-packaging into individual consumer sizes. Michigan consumers increasingly turned to local food producers for produce and meat during the COVID-19 pandemic.

THE NEED FOR EMERGENCY FOOD INTENSIFIED DURING COVID-19 DUE TO AN INCREASE OF NEWLY UNEMPLOYED INDIVIDUALS AND INDIVIDUALS' INABILITY TO REACH EXISTING FOOD DISTRIBUTION POINTS.

Michiganders food insecure pre-COVID-19 faced intensified disparities marked by key determinants such as race, disability status, non-college students between the ages of 18 and 30, and individuals who experience high food prices affecting food access. Those newly unemployed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic needed emergency food for the first time, dramatically increasing the volume of emergency food distributed during this time period as well as applications to state assistance programs. School closures increased the number of children and families in need of food outside of traditional congregate school feeding and nutrition programs. Vulnerable populations such as older adults, individuals with disabilities, individuals at increased risk from COVID-19 complications, and those quarantined were disproportionately unable to access food.

FOOD PROGRAMS AND SERVICES NEEDED NEW AND DIFFERENT INFRASTRUCTURE TO MEET COVID-19 PROTOCOLS AND CONDITIONS.

In order to meet the needs of food insecure individuals during COVID-19, emergency food service and program providers were required to ramp up to scale their operations and alter their distribution methods to COVID-19 contactless protocols. In addition, agencies and organizations needed to work together across sectors to fund, staff, and execute emergency food distribution as well as other related health and nutrition programs and wrap-around services (transportation, procuring PPE) effectively.

Summary of Recommendations

FOOD SUPPLY

1. Develop a linguistically and culturally-appropriate communications strategy to address panic buying.
2. Prioritize foodworkers along the entire food supply chain for personal protective equipment and linguistically and culturally-appropriate workplace safety materials.
3. Develop a strategy to secure additional repackaging equipment or services that can be activated when food supply needs to pivot from commercial to direct-to-consumer packaging.
4. Create a statewide program that engages the restaurant sector and its workforce to distribute prepared meals to vulnerable populations.
5. Create a program to provide stipends to key food infrastructure workers similar to health care workers during the COVID-19 pandemic.
6. Identify a workforce alignment approach that offers workers impacted by job loss placement in sectors suffering from labor or volunteer shortages.

ADDRESSING THE NEED

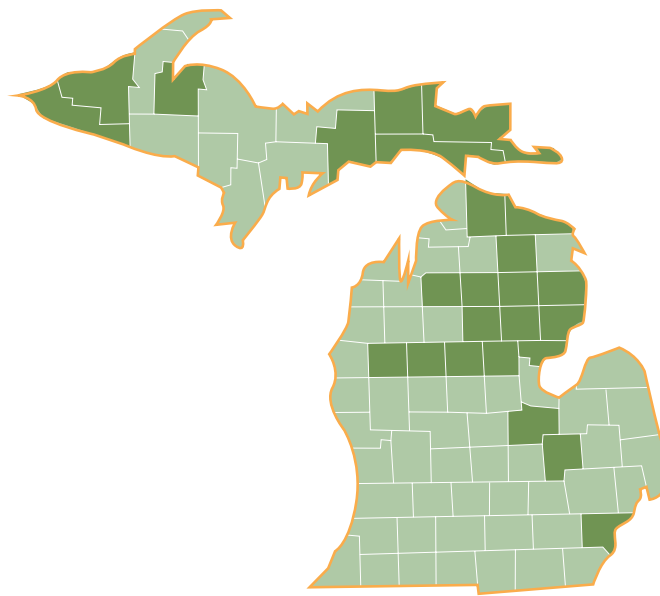
7. In the event of a future public health emergency, require the state's swift pursuit of all USDA Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) pre-existing food program services and programmatic flexibilities in the form of waivers.
8. Develop approaches for last-mile food distribution, such as home delivery.
9. Provide incentives for retailers to accept online EBT.
10. Develop and implement a "no wrong door" approach to food and other emergency assistance.
11. Leverage the daily cap lift on Double Up Food Bucks earnings.

COLLABORATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE FOR FOOD AND NUTRITION PROGRAMS

12. Continue the formal partnership between the food banks and state emergency operations personnel, including the activation of the Emergency Food Distribution Agreement when a state of emergency or disaster is declared. Additionally, the SEOC should convene meetings with all emergency service providers to coordinate the distribution of food to vulnerable populations.
13. Develop a process for communities to create local emergency response plans in coordination with county emergency managers.
14. Ensure continued collaboration across agencies and organizations responsible for food and nutrition programs and services.
15. Develop a data-sharing and technology protocol that identifies client need and tracks total food distribution across organizations and agencies.
16. Continue the deployment of Michigan National Guard to food banks to assist with volunteer shortages during COVID-19 or future public health emergencies.

Background

Despite the efforts of many dedicated organizations and agencies, food insecurity remains a persistent problem in Michigan. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, approximately 1.3 million Michiganders faced food insecurity, and now, it is estimated that approximately 1.9 million individuals are food insecure in Michigan, 552,400 of which represent children.¹ Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, 49 percent of those seeking food assistance had a household member who was working.² The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated this problem of food insecurity, as rising unemployment and school closures have brought economic challenges to many Michigan households, creating many new food-insecure individuals in need of assistance at the same time that many who faced food security pre-COVID-19 have become more vulnerable. High food insecurity rates correlate with pronounced racial disparities, in areas such as the metro Detroit area as well as several counties in Northern Michigan in which Tribal reservations are located (see Figure 1).



Food Insecurity Rates	4-14%	15-19%	20-24%	25-29%	30%+
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Figure 1. Food Insecurity Rates in Michigan (2018).³

The Food Security Council (FSC) was created by Governor Whitmer’s [Executive Order No. 2020-167](#) as an advisory body in the Department of Health and Human Services to adequately inform the state’s response to food insecurity, both during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The FSC is charged with coordinating across state government and with industry and community stakeholders to ensure a broad range of input from relevant entities, reporting on best practices to ensure safe and effective food distribution to Michiganders in need.

¹ Gundersen, C., A. Dewey, E. Engelhard, M. Strayer, & L. Lapinski. *Map the Meal Gap 2020: A Report on County and Congressional District Food Insecurity and County Food Cost in the United States in 2018*. Feeding America, 2020 [updated projections for 2020].

² Mills, G., Weinfeld, N., Borger, C., et al. *Hunger in America 2014: State Report for Michigan*. Report Prepared for Feeding America, September 2014.

³ Gundersen, C. “Who is Food Insecure in Michigan?” Figure based on Feeding America’s Map the Meal Gap data and created for Presentation to Food Security Council, September 29, 2020.

The following is the full charge to the FSC:

- Identify and analyze the nature, scope, and causes of food insecurity in Michigan.
- Identify and assess evidence-based policies to decrease food insecurity, both during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. This should include consideration of innovative efforts and proposals, as well as solutions adopted by other states to address food insecurity and their potential applicability to the problem as it exists in Michigan.
- Analyze the return on investment to policies that decrease food insecurity, including, where appropriate, cost-benefit analysis of these policies' impacts on economic growth, educational outcomes, health outcomes, and other areas.
- Review and make recommendations regarding how the resources and efforts currently devoted to address food insecurity can be best coordinated and implemented, and how those resources and efforts can be most effectively supplemented.
- Review and make recommendations regarding legislation potentially relevant to the causes of, and/or potential solutions for, food insecurity in Michigan.
- Provide other information, advice, or take other actions as requested by the governor.
- The Council must prepare a final report and submit it to the governor.

Per Executive Order No. 2020-167, the Food Security Council is charged with providing an initial report to the Governor by November 7, 2020 that must include “short-term findings and recommendations related to food insecurity and COVID-19.” In order to fulfill this charge of producing an initial report, the FSC undertook the following actions:

1. Held [full FSC public meetings](#) via Microsoft Teams and teleconference access on September 1, September 15, September 29, October 13, and October 27, 2020.
2. Solicited expert testimony provided at those meetings from a range of expertise and experience, representing academic, government, and non-profit organizations.
3. Conducted a survey of FSC members and their extended networks regarding the impact of COVID-19 on Michigan’s food systems, food supply chain, and food programs and services.
4. Distributed a report of the COVID-19 survey results to inform FSC discussion and recommendations.

The recommendations included in this Initial Report were produced by several diverse groups of subject matter experts, reviewed by departmental leadership, and endorsed by the appointees of the FSC. These recommendations were endorsed without objection within the FSC. Some recommendations emphasize actions that have already been undertaken and are recommended to continue, while others are aspirational and will require further consideration by different departments and legislative bodies to assess the required resources and operational challenges.

Key Findings

Impact of COVID-19 on the Food Supply Chain

The food supply chain consists of the movement of food from agricultural production, to manufacturing and processing, marketing, consumption, and disposal, waste, and recovery (see Figure 2).

At the onset of COVID-19, there was much expressed concern with the **amount of food in the food supply chain**. The Michigan Department of Agriculture & Rural Development (MDARD) held weekly meetings with industry stakeholders “including grocers, convenience stores, food processors, producers, and community groups to identify the impact the virus was having on Michigan’s food supply system.”⁴ What MDARD learned from these stakeholders was that food supply was plentiful, but a challenge existed in the perception of food supply due to **consumer panic buying**.



Figure 2. The Food Supply Chain.⁷

Consumer panic buying (also referred to as “pandemic purchasing”) caused during the COVID-19 led to empty shelves and retailers to order more food supply to restock, which in turn caused difficulties for those emergency and charitable food providers. As the FSC’s COVID-19 impact survey indicated, many respondents representing these agencies and organizations experienced difficulty procuring certain food and household items for distribution (meat, cleaning supplies, shelf-stable items), particularly in March and April of 2020. This in turn affected the amount, type, and frequency of food distributed.⁵ Further, this inability to procure enough food from suppliers to meet the unprecedented elevated need for emergency food led to the execution of a Food Distribution Agreement between the Food Bank Council of Michigan and State Emergency Management in April of 2020, in which the State of Michigan purchased \$3.6 million dollars of food directly for Michigan’s food banks to distribute to food insecure Michiganders.⁶

While the amount of food supply remained ample, the swift closure of restaurants and other institutional congregate feeding sites (e.g., schools and universities, group homes, senior congregate meals) created a situation in which **food packaged for institutional or commercial use needed to be re-packaged for individual household consumption**. This again created difficulties for a quick transfer and re-purposing of food for both retail sale and emergency food distribution. While some re-packaging for more readily re-sized foods took place during the pandemic, other donations of food in large sizes could not be accepted due to inability to re-package quickly and cost-effectively.

⁴ McDowell, G. “COVID-19 Impact on Michigan’s Food Supply.” Presentation to the Food Security Council, September 15, 2020.

⁵ “COVID-19 Impact Survey Results.” Report prepared for Food Security Council, submitted October 9, 2020.

⁶ Thelen, R. “COVID Emergency Food Supply Response.” Presentation to the Food Security Council, October 13, 2020.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated pre-existing food processing challenges. One such challenge lies with meat processing. As Liz Gensler of the Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems reported (based on issues raised by local food councils) to the FSC, “We have heard for years that we could use more meat processing facilities in the state, and COVID caused a bottleneck with meat processing.”⁷ However, MDARD reported that the bottleneck was and is focused on custom meat processing (which is still running 12+ months behind). There is still ample meat available at retail, but selection may be impacted.

While some disruptions in food selection occurred during COVID-19, many Michigan consumers shifted to purchase from local fruit, vegetable, and meat purveyors. Initially, farmers’ markets experienced disruptions in service while adopting COVID-19 protocols and building infrastructure to operate safely under COVID-19. Respondents to the FSC’s COVID-19 impact survey discussed difficulties for vendors who lost sources of income from not only closed farmers’ markets, but also wholesalers and other purchasers such as restaurants and schools.⁸ The Double Up Food Bucks program, which matches SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) spent on fresh fruits and vegetables while supporting Michigan farmers, was able to increase flexibilities in caps on matching and fast-tracking new vendors during COVID-19, and as a result saw increases in program use—doubling usage in grocery stores and farmers’ markets.⁹

“Throughout the pandemic it became even more evident that workers are the backbone of the industry and are a critical component to a functioning food supply system. Migrant and seasonal workers are essential to harvesting the fruits and vegetables grown in Michigan along with helping to sort, pack, and process.”

– Director Gary McDowell, Michigan Department of Agriculture & Rural Development¹⁰

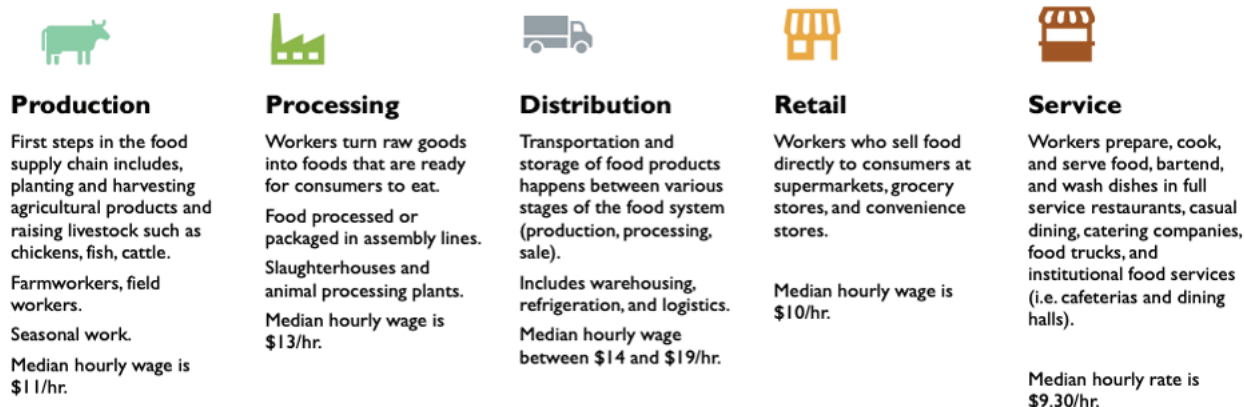


Figure 3. Who are “Food Workers”?⁸

⁷ Gensler, L. “Michigan Local Food Council Network.” Presentation to the Food Security Council, September 15, 2020.

⁸ “COVID-19 Impact Survey Results.” Report prepared for Food Security Council, submitted October 9, 2020.

⁹ “Double Up Food Bucks: 2020 COVID-19 Response.” Fair Food Network, Summer 2020.

¹⁰ McDowell, G. “COVID-19 Impact on Michigan’s Food Supply.” Presentation to the Food Security Council, September 15, 2020.

¹¹ Marin, Diana. “‘Essential’ and Food Insecure: Effects of COVID-19 on Food Workers along the Food Supply Chain.” Figure created for presentation to Food Security Council, September 15, 2020.

A critical component to the food supply chain in Michigan is its food workers. Food workers exist in every segment of the food supply chain, as shown in Figure 3. As Diana Marin, supervising attorney at the Michigan Immigrant Rights Center, presented to the FSC, food workers are essential to the stability of the food supply chain; and uniquely vulnerable to food insecurity and other hardships due to their low wages, the nature of seasonal and migrant work, and frontline worker status with elevated risk of exposure to the virus in their places of employment. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed food workers disproportionately to the virus, with several reported clusters or outbreaks of the virus occurring in agricultural/food processing/migrant work camps and bar, restaurant, and retail food settings.¹² These outbreaks and the threat of outbreaks had economic consequences for food workers in the form of loss of employment, lack of child care and other work and income supports. While MDARD worked to provide safe housing and testing for migrant and seasonal workers, lack of paid sick time, loss of employment, and lack of access to other forms of assistance had deleterious effects on food workers during COVID-19.

Impact of COVID-19 on Food Insecure Individuals

As discussed in the Background section above, approximately 1.3 million Michiganders were considered food insecure prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Dr. Craig Gundersen, ACES Distinguished Professor at the University of Illinois (and collaborator on Feeding America's Map the Meal Gap study) reported to the FSC, food insecure individuals tend to be disproportionately affected by key determinants that include racial disparities, disability status, non-college students between the ages of 18 and 30, and individuals who experience high food prices affecting food access. Figure 1 reflects geographic representation of food insecurity in 2018, which reflects high rates of food insecurity disproportionately in urban areas with majority Black residents, such as Wayne County, MI, and rural areas in the northern counties of Michigan, which represent regions where several Native communities reside.

The COVID-19 pandemic not only worsened disparities affecting food insecurity for those Michiganders already experiencing it (in a similar manner to health disparities and COVID-19 health outcomes), but also created new and different demographics of food insecure individuals. Projections for the full population of Michigan indicate that during the COVID-19 pandemic, a 38.2% increase in food insecurity in Michigan's overall population, and for children, a 63.3% increase in food insecurity.¹³ Those individuals newly unemployed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic needed emergency food for the first time, dramatically increasing the volume of inquiries for food assistance to United Way 2-1-1, as well as the amount of emergency food distributed during this time period as well as applications to the Food Assistance Program (FAP), Michigan's name for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). To illustrate, Figure 4 reflects the increase in food distributed at Gleaners Community Food Bank in Detroit, while Figure 5 demonstrates FAP application growth during COVID-19.

¹² "Outbreak Reporting." State of Michigan statistics by setting as reported on *Michigan.gov*. September 10, 2020.

¹³ Gundersen, C. "Who is Food Insecure in Michigan?" Presentation to the Food Security Council, September 29, 2020.

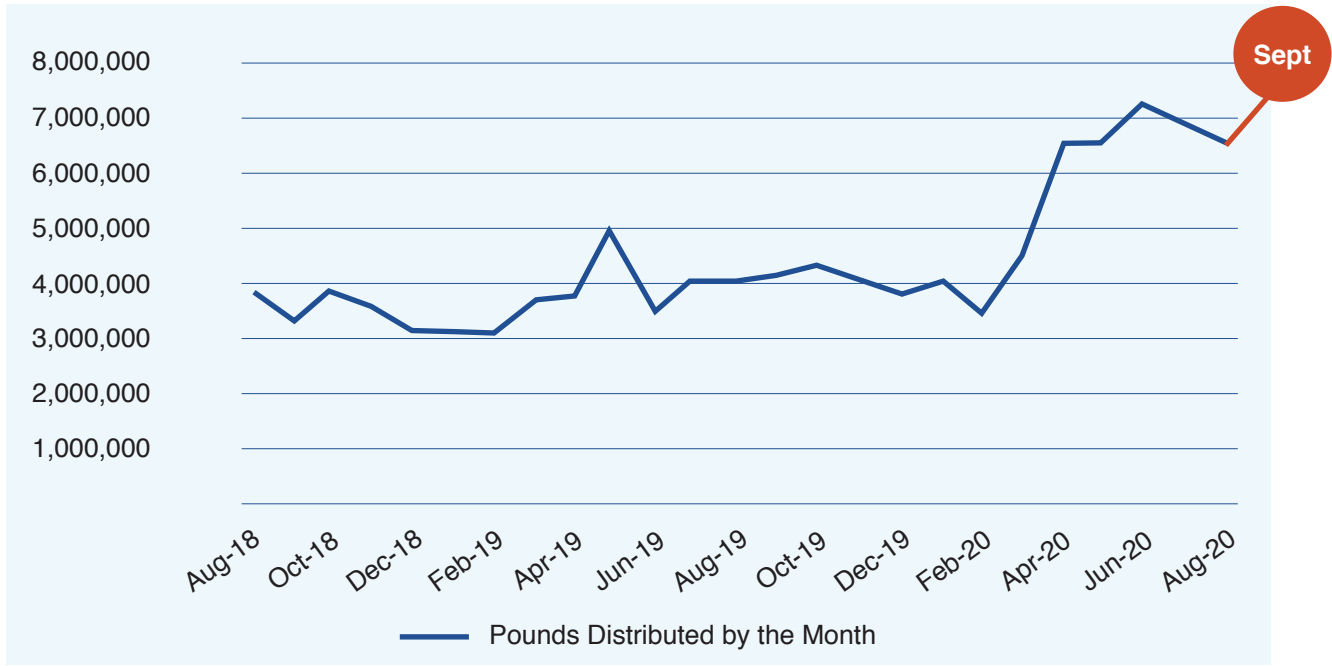


Figure 4. Gleaners Community Food Bank: Rapid Response to Meet Sudden Need.¹⁴

"[Our] client registration forms show increase in emergency food recipients and record numbers of clients "new" to our services. Anecdotal evidence from staff, volunteers, and clients suggests the pandemic affected some families disproportionately... Our food purchases doubled in April 2020 compared to the previous year."

—Jessyca Stoepker, Manna Food Project, Harbor Springs, MI¹⁵

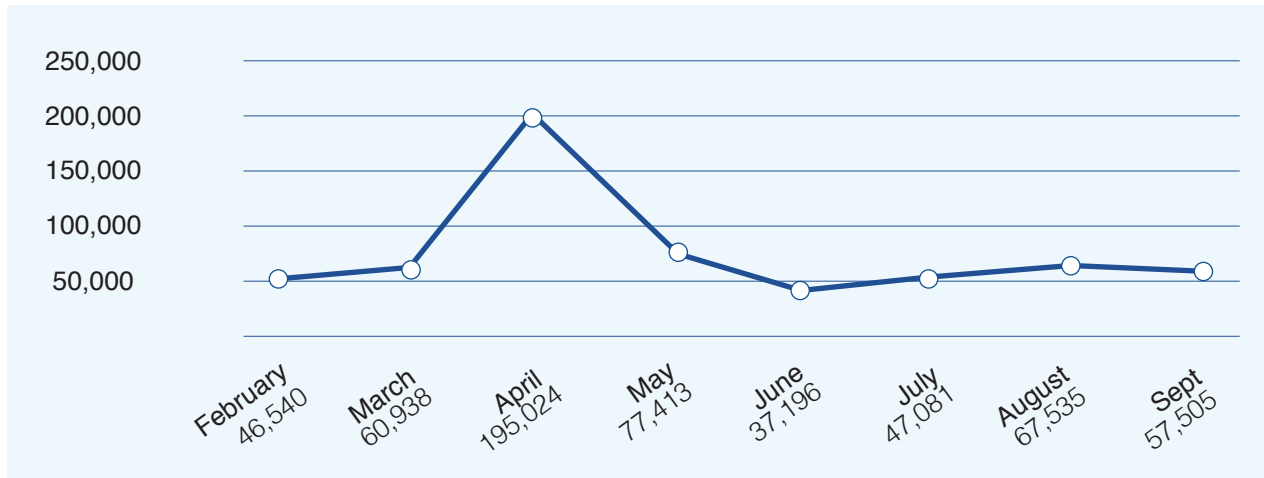


Figure 5. FAP Application Growth (2020).¹⁶

¹⁴ "Gleaners' Emergency Response to Address Food Insecurity." Internal document, submitted to Food Security Council October 2, 2020.

¹⁵ "COVID-19 Impact Survey Results." Report prepared for Food Security Council, submitted October 9, 2020.

¹⁶ Rivera, J., & Sweeney, D. Graph from "COVID-19: Michigan's Food Assistance Response." Presentation to Food Security Council, October 13, 2020.

Statewide school closures increased the number of **children and families** in need of food outside of traditional congregate school nutrition programs. Beginning in March 2020, school cafeterias that serve free and reduced breakfast and lunch programs were closed, and the unanticipated school closure (SFSP) program went into effect, wherein families can pick up meals for students during the closure. Even with the swift implementation of SFSP and the successful approvals for flexibilities in program execution, the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) reported a 4.7% decrease in meals served from March-June 2020 compared to March-June 2019 statewide, from 82.4 million meals to 78.6 million meals. Dr. Diane Golzynski of MDE Child Nutrition Programs expressed concern for children aged 0-5 who are or were receiving meals under the Child and Adult Care Food Program, which has had declining meal counts since March 2020—down 61.7% over prior year from March-June 2020, and 63.9% over prior year in July.¹⁷

Vulnerable populations such as **older adults, individuals with disabilities, individuals at increased COVID-19 risk, and quarantined individuals** were disproportionately unable to access food during the COVID-19 pandemic. The closure of facilities such as senior centers and group homes, combined with fear of contracting or spreading the COVID-19 virus, created a situation where, simultaneously, congregate meals were no longer offered for older adults and individuals with disabilities, and those at increased risk expressed fear and/or inability to go to the grocery store. Additionally, the loss of prepared meals in congregate settings created difficulty during COVID-19 for those unable to cook for themselves, without a kitchen to prepare groceries, and/or who experience social isolation without congregate meals. Finally, many vulnerable during COVID-19 suffered loss of housing and inability to pay for utilities and transportation, further affecting their ability to access food and other necessities.

On March 31, St. Joseph County United Way Executive Director Kelly Hostetler had 200 boxes of food at the organization's free food distribution giveaway to give away to residents in need. Within only 12 minutes, those boxes were gone, and about 200 carloads of people had to be turned away. "It's sad," Hostetler said as she reflected on stories of those needing food. 'There was a single mom with five kids, asking if there was any way we could help her.' Another driver was a woman with cancer, her caregiver and shopper under self-quarantine because of coronavirus. Another car held a frustrated elderly couple afraid to go to the store.¹⁸

According to a survey of 484 Michiganders aged 18 and over, conducted in June of 2020, the impact of food insecurity on **food-insecure individuals in their daily lives—versus food secure individuals—includes more worry about food, more challenges accessing food, and using coping strategies to afford food**. Food-insecure respondents indicated that they used the coping strategies during COVID-19 of stretching food by eating less (61%), buying foods that do not go bad quickly (66%), and buying different, cheaper foods (67%), at an overwhelmingly higher rate than food-secure individuals. These findings reveal a disconcerting negative effect on the nutrition and health of food-insecure individuals during COVID-19.¹⁹

¹⁷ Golzynski, D. "Federal Nutrition Programs (FNS) at MDE." Presentation to the Food Security Council, October 13, 2020.

¹⁸ "Food Distribution Meets Need after Previous Depletion," *Sturgis Journal*, April 6, 2020.

¹⁹ Beavers, A. "Michigan Food Insecurity in the Wake of COVID-19." Presentation to the Food Security Council, September 29, 2020

Impact of COVID-19 on Food and Nutrition Programs

The greatest impact on community organizations and agencies providing food and nutrition programs and services was felt in the “ramp up” of infrastructure to meet the unprecedented increase in need for food during COVID-19, expressed by Michigan service providers in Table 1:

-
- Speed with which ramp up had to occur.
 - More food and funding emerged, but volume of food to distribute created problems without developing greater infrastructure. Inability to access funds for some agencies, or for others, inability to use funds to adapt infrastructure.
 - Conforming program delivery and food distribution to COVID-19 safety guidelines.
 - Replacing congregated meals with other feeding models at scale.
 - Difficulties with virtual meetings and programming (lack of internet/phone access, communication gaps, reaching less tech-savvy older adults, social isolation).
 - Lack of client transportation or client home delivery options/difficulty with home delivery.
 - Communicating programmatic changes to clients.
-

Table 1. Challenges with Ramping Up to Meet COVID-19 Need.²⁰

“We also realized that over 4,774 people have been served in the food pantry through our curbside pickup model. It’s certainly more than the 2,899 people we served during the same time period last year. And it’s already more than the total number of people we served all last year, or the year before that, with 20 weeks still left in 2020.”

– Scott Rumpsa, Community Action House, Holland, MI²¹

Overwhelmingly, COVID-19 necessitated immediate changes to distribution models at scale. In order to adhere to COVID-19 protocols, most food distribution models changed to drive-through distributions of boxed food. Home delivery options were in demand but difficult to achieve because of last-mile difficulties, or difficulties with finding volunteer drivers able to deliver door-to-door. At the same time additional labor was needed to distribute more food, a reduction in volunteer labor and staff layoffs occurred. Agencies and community-based organizations reported significant **staff and volunteer shortages** during COVID-19.

“Food programs have experienced nearly 200% increase in requests, Children’s camp programs lost \$950,000 in fees, released 12 staff members due to budget concerns, without additional CARES/HEROES act funding our organization faces increased layoff and program closures.”

– Bev Cassidy, TrueNorth Community Services, Fremont, MI²²

²⁰ “COVID-19 Impact Survey Results.” Report prepared for Food Security Council, submitted October 9, 2020.

²¹ “COVID-19 Impact Survey Results.” Report prepared for Food Security Council, submitted October 9, 2020.

²² “COVID-19 Impact Survey Results.” Report prepared for Food Security Council, submitted October 9, 2020.

For federal and state food assistance programs, Michigan MDE and MDHHS' actions to seek **waivers from USDA Food and Nutrition Services (FNS) for programmatic flexibilities** to pre-existing FNS programs have been appreciated by both service and program providers throughout the state of Michigan as well as with clients. Extensions and flexibilities offered in child nutrition programs such as the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and Seamless Summer Option (SSO) have allowed for collaborations with food banks and other partners to provide grocery items and distribute more food, as well as allowed families flexibility in choice of pick-up location and many other flexibilities that have provided more food to more families. Michigan was one of the first states to deliver SNAP emergency allotments, which strengthened the benefits of 386,000 families receiving food assistance. Michigan was also the first state to issue Pandemic EBT (P-EBT) benefits, beginning in March 2020, to over 900,000 children eligible for free or reduced lunch benefits. Finally, beginning May 29, 2020, Michigan implemented online EBT technology, allowing food assistance recipients the ability to purchase groceries online.²³

Kathy is a 53-year-old, African American woman that resides in Mount Pleasant. She lives with her husband, who is Caucasian, and her 17-year-old son that is attending high school. She and her husband both have disabilities. Her husband is diagnosed with end-stage renal failure and both she and her husband are diabetic. Neither Kathy nor her husband drives. Before COVID, Kathy and her family were receiving around \$150 in SNAP benefits for a household of 3... During the pandemic, Kathy's family has received \$509 each month, the maximum amount of SNAP benefits for a household of three. Kathy stated that the additional benefits allowed her family the option to purchase more healthy, nutritious foods. It also provided consistency for Kathy to buy what the family needed without having to worry about running out of food at the end of the month. "In order to be able to feed our family of three and still pay our bills, losing the extra benefits will shift how we shop."²⁴

Community-based organizations noted that WIC programs and services experienced some early COVID-19 disruption largely due the closure of many buildings where WIC services were traditionally offered. Once waivers were applied for and received from USDA FNS, local agencies were able to transition to remote WIC services, to which they have adapted well, and have been able to meet the concurrent increased demand for services. WIC clients have reported altered food shopping practices and some outages/quantity limits enforced for WIC foods but clients and service providers indicate that availability has improved.²⁵

Federal and state relief funds, such as the CARES Act, allowed for food and nutrition collaborations across sectors during COVID-19. A new **senior quarantine box program**, developed in partnership with MDHHS Aging and Adult Services and the Food Bank Council of Michigan, has distributed over 35,000 boxes to homebound and food insecure older adults across Michigan from April through December 2020. The boxes in that program were packed at food bank warehouses by the Michigan National Guard, deployed to food banks during the pandemic to meet the increased workload.

²³ Rivera, J., & Sweeney, D. "COVID-19: Michigan's Food Assistance Response." Presentation to Food Security Council, October 13, 2020.

²⁴ "Client Testimonial Interview." Report prepared by Food Bank Council of Michigan for Food Security Council, submitted October 19, 2020.

²⁵ "COVID-19 Impact Survey Results." Report prepared for Food Security Council, submitted October 9, 2020.

Collaborative efforts across sectors underscored the need to leverage data and technology—both for planning purposes for service providers to understand the need for food in its totality across programs, and to identify infrastructure development required to execute needed programming (for example, rolling out online EBT and home delivery programs). For programs, it was difficult to ascertain how one sector’s services would affect another’s, and therefore, to project the needed amount of resources to address clients across programs. Further, the inability to collect, analyze, and report disaggregated data related to food security by age, race, ethnicity, gender, disability, neighborhood, and other sociodemographic characteristics²⁶ prevents the targeted design of equitable COVID-19 response strategies as they pertain to food security. Lack of technology to support shared operation of online grocery shopping using EBT and for home delivery services for food for vulnerable populations exacerbated inequities.

Despite these challenges, we know that collaborations across governmental, nonprofit, and industry partners have proven beneficial during the COVID-19 pandemic. Collaborations that proved particularly beneficial to the 140 COVID-19 Impact report respondents were and are:

- Federal government: CDC, Indian Health Service (IHS), US Congressional officials, federal Administration on Community Living, CARES Act funds, USDA
- National organizations: Feeding America, Food retailers (Meijer), food suppliers, Boys and Girls Clubs, Consumers Energy
- State government: Governor’s office, MDE, MDHHS, MDARD, Michigan National Guard, State of Michigan website
- State organizations: Food Bank Council of Michigan, MI Fair Food Network, University of Michigan, MSU-Extension, Michigan Farmers Market Association, MI Food Policy Council, MI Farm Bureau
- Regional: Bay Mills Indian Community, area chambers of commerce, Inter-Tribal Council of MI, Northwest Food Coalition, Manna Food Project, volunteer mask makers, Gleaners Community Food Bank, Food Gatherers, various United Ways, Area Offices on Aging (UPCAP), Groundworks Center for Resilient Communities, Western UP Food Systems Collaborative
- Local: county health departments, county emergency management, local food policy councils, local community foundations, local farms, local restaurants.

Table 2. List of Beneficial Resources and Collaborations During COVID-19.²⁷

²⁶ “Health Equity Principles for State and Local Leaders in Responding to, Reopening, and Recovering from COVID-19.” Issue Brief, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, May 2020.

²⁷ “COVID-19 Impact Survey Results.” Report prepared for Food Security Council, submitted October 9, 2020.

Recommendations

Food Supply

The following recommendations address the key findings regarding COVID-19 related food supply chain issues.

Recommendation 1: Develop a linguistically and culturally-appropriate communications strategy to address panic buying.

A multi-pronged communication strategy should be developed that 1) communicates widely to the public to prevent panic buying, including a campaign to increase understanding of the sufficiency of food in the supply chain during a pandemic; 2) a public service announcement that promotes retailer-imposed limits on consumer purchasing, potentially in conjunction with the Michigan Grocers Association and the Michigan Retailers Association; and 3) communicates importance of preparedness to reduce purchasing surges.

Recommendation 2: Prioritize foodworkers along the entire food supply chain for personal protective equipment and linguistically and culturally-appropriate workplace safety materials.

All foodworkers and their employers at every link in the food supply chain seeking PPE on their own faced challenges during COVID-19. While the State Emergency Operations Center (SEOC)'s focus was on purchasing PPE for frontline healthcare workers, the FSC recommends that a similar purchasing and distribution strategy be devised for PPE across the food supply chain. In addition, the FSC recommends that linguistically and culturally-appropriate workplace safety materials be developed for foodworkers and their employers, from growers, meatpackers, suppliers, distributors, and retailers. The FSC recommends MDARD in collaboration with the SEOC develop a proactive strategy to address foodworker PPE needs.

Recommendation 3: Develop a strategy to secure additional repackaging equipment or services that can be activated when food supply needs pivot from commercial to direct-to-consumer packaging.

With ample food in the supply chain, COVID-19 demonstrated not a food shortage, but a re-packaging issue, specifically for food meant to supply restaurants and congregate cafeteria meal settings. In order to re-purpose this food for small-scale, individual household consumption, it is necessary to acquire equipment or services that can be activated in times of food supply chain disruption. Food safety considerations must be prioritized in this strategy to pivot the food supply. The FSC recommends that a granting mechanism be developed for various entities to equip themselves for this pivot in the event of a future emergency, and to consider similar strategies as to the automotive industry pivoting to produce medical supplies and PPE to meet COVID-19 needs.

Recommendation 4: Create a statewide program that engages the restaurant sector and its workforce to distribute prepared meals to vulnerable populations.

As the restaurant sector experienced significant economic hardship during the COVID-19 pandemic, so did a need arise for prepared meals at scale, for those vulnerable populations left without congregate meal settings. The FSC recommends the creation of a program that could leverage the restaurant sector and its workforce to fill this need during a public health emergency such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Recommendation 5: Create a program to provide stipends to key food infrastructure workers similar to health care workers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The average hourly wage of agricultural workers does not provide an ample workforce to address periods of increased food need or provide a safety net for public health incidents when workers may fall ill and not be able to work. In lieu of universal sick leave policies, consideration should be given to develop a stipend mechanism that provides supplemental wages to key food infrastructure workers when a public health crisis threatens to risk food supply. This program could potentially follow the stipends provided to essential healthcare workers using Coronavirus Relief Funds. To protect against long-term displacement, this program should also consider temporary income replacement during quarantine periods for future health emergencies, as occurred at the beginning of August 2020 for Michigan farmworkers.

Recommendation 6: Identify a workforce alignment approach that offers workers impacted by job loss placement in sectors suffering from labor or volunteer shortages.

Key findings from this report indicate simultaneous worker and volunteer shortages in all areas of food supply, services and programs and massive unemployment. The FSC suggests investigating whether LEO Workforce Development funding could be used to subsidize volunteer hours at food pantries or food distribution points. Also included for consideration is the potential role of the Michigan Works! Association to assist with matching individuals seeking work to critical jobs available within the food supply chain.

Recommendation 7: In the event of a future public health emergency, require the state's swift pursuit of all USDA Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) pre-existing food program services and programmatic flexibilities in the form of waivers.

As this report indicates, the programmatic flexibilities offered in the form of waivers to pre-existing FNS programs—specifically, extensions and flexibilities offered in child feeding programs such as the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and Seamless Summer Option (SSO), SNAP Emergency Allotments, WIC product flexibilities, and new, pandemic-responsive programs such as Pandemic-EBT (P-EBT) and the Farmers to Families Food Box Program—afforded great relief to Michiganders during COVID-19. These provided effective relief to thousands but must be pursued by the state swiftly to bring that relief to Michigan. Further, the FSC recommends the creation and ready implementation of linguistically and culturally-appropriate communication plans about these emergency programs so that Michiganders may better understand what maximum assistance is available to them in a public health emergency.

Recommendation 8: Develop approaches for last-mile food distribution, such as home delivery.

A key finding from the FSC's COVID-19 inquiry is that vulnerable populations of Michiganders (specifically, older adults, those quarantined or at greater health risk, individuals with disabilities, and those without transportation and/or residing in rural or underserved communities) disproportionately struggled with food access during COVID-19. Concurrently, efforts to implement home delivered food programs stalled due to inability to activate volunteers or other delivery mechanisms. The FSC recommends that approaches be developed to expand home delivery of food from all food and nutrition services programs (food banks and pantries, area agencies on aging, community action agencies, farmers' markets, etc.) for these vulnerable, hard-to-reach populations. Local grants to communities to develop this infrastructure, including potentially partnering with commercial services for logistics, is an avenue that should be explored.

Recommendation 9: Provide incentives for retailers to accept online EBT.

Throughout the COVID-19 emergency, SNAP benefit recipients were required to present their EBT card at a point of sale machine in order to procure groceries. A waiver to this requirement was procured by the MDHHS SNAP coordinator from FNS in May, allowing Michigan SNAP recipients to purchase groceries online and pick them up curbside from two permitted national retailers. Still, the need for home-delivered groceries ordered online is substantial, and few retailers support the use of online EBT payment. The FSC recommends that incentives be provided to more retailers, including local retailers, to accept online EBT purchases. The FSC also recommends a consideration of the subsidization of delivery fees for residents who receive EBT benefits and also meet certain qualifications, such as disability, lack of transportation, demonstrating the need to quarantine, or others.

Recommendation 10: Develop and implement a “no wrong door” approach to food and other emergency assistance.

Those seeking assistance during COVID-19 experienced difficulty learning what resources were available and how to procure them. The FSC recommends providing funding to develop an approach to connect individuals seeking assistance from the emergency food network to connect to state and federally funded assistance programs such as SNAP, WIC, P-EBT, child food and nutrition programs, as well as potentially employment services and economic mobility resources. Further, a linguistically and culturally-appropriate communications strategy for all emergency food programs and services should be developed and distributed to the public widely, particularly at points of client contact such as COVID-19 help hotlines, United Way 2-1-1, SNAP outreach hotlines, and other agencies providing referrals.

Recommendation 11: Leverage the daily cap lift on Double Up Food Bucks earnings.

Evidence provided to the FSC indicates that food-insecure individuals bought significantly less fresh produce during COVID-19, citing concerns over expense and potential food waste while budgets were tightened due to unemployment. Programmatic enhancements were made to Double Up Food Bucks to lift the daily cap on Double Up earnings, allowing families to earn a Double Up dollar to match every Bridge card dollar they spent on fresh produce (instead of a \$20/day cap). The FSC recommends that future enhancements be explored to leverage this program.

Recommendations: Coordination and Infrastructure

The following recommendations address the key findings regarding how government, industry, and the non-profit sector work together during a pandemic such as COVID-19.

Recommendation 12: Continue the partnership between the food banks and state emergency operations personnel, including the activation of the Emergency Food Distribution Agreement when a state of emergency or disaster is declared.

The relationship between the Food Bank Council of Michigan and State Emergency Operations Center (SEOC)—as evidenced in the Emergency Food Distribution Agreement to procure and distribute emergency food supply and seek reimbursement under FEMA’s Public Assistance program—should be extended and activated in times of emergency. Notice to food banks and other emergency service providers of potential shelter-in-place restrictions and statewide school closures through the SEOC would ensure better preparedness for food supply and ability to distribute to those in need quickly. The FSC also recommends a system to structure reporting of food insecurity across a continuum—including appropriate community-based service providers and, where present, Federally Recognized Tribes (or tribal governments) and develop pre-approved responses based on the level of pressure placed on the emergency food network and demonstrated food insecurity experienced by vulnerable populations. This would reduce the cycle time from observation of a problem to appropriate system-level responses.

Recommendation 13: Develop a process for communities to create local emergency response plans in coordination with county emergency managers.

While the SEOC-led response at the state level grew in its coordination and infrastructure, local communities had difficulties accessing resources and opportunities to coordinate more localized emergency response plans. The FSC recommends that communities with the highest rates of food insecurity be identified and that funding be provided for local emergency food distribution partners, including local food councils and Federally Recognized Tribes or Tribal governments, where present, to develop emergency response plans in coordination with county emergency managers that specifically outline approaches to identifying wide varieties of food sources, as well as approaches to supplying food to vulnerable populations in congregate settings such as long-term care facilities, group homes, and adult foster care.

Recommendation 14: Ensure continued collaboration across agencies and organizations responsible for food and nutrition programs and services.

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the need for ready communication across State of Michigan departments, the SEOC, FEMA, the Food Bank Council of Michigan, local food councils, and Federally Recognized Tribes or Tribal governments, where present, groups representing special populations, and others essential to ensuring that food supply, need for emergency food, and delivery systems are identified and resolved utilizing a coordinated approach. Regular meetings across these entities were established during COVID-19 by Michigan DHHS and the FSC recommends ensuring continued collaboration.

Recommendation 15: Develop a technology and data-sharing protocol that identifies client need and overall food distributed across organizations and agencies.

Collecting data for the COVID-19 Initial Report has garnered insights into the data capabilities (and limitations) of Michigan's state agencies and nonprofit organizations to assess and project Michigan's emergency food need in its entirety and to quantify food available for distribution across programs. The FSC recommends the creation of a data partnership to measure client need and food supply and to gain a better understanding of the interdependence of programs across sectors. This data partnership should be attuned to the need for disaggregation of data to ensure an equitable food access response.

Recommendation 16: Continue the deployment of Michigan National Guard to food banks to assist with volunteer shortages during COVID-19 or future public health emergencies.

Members of the Michigan National Guard sorted and packed emergency food at Food Bank Council of Michigan-affiliated food banks for the State Emergency Operations Center (SEOC)'s emergency food response and for the Michigan DHHS' Senior Quarantine Box program, filling a critical need during the loss of volunteers inside food banks during COVID-19. Without them, these emergency food programs could not have been executed at scale. The FSC recommends that the deployment of Michigan National Guard to Michigan's food banks be authorized at the onset of any future public health emergency.

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