

CORONAVIRUS DISEASE 2019 [COVID-19]



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NAVIGATING EMERGENCY FOOD ORGANIZATIONS & RESOURCES IN TIMES OF CRISIS AND BEYOND

OVERVIEW

This brief is intended to help supportive and affordable housing and health and human service partners understand and more effectively assess resident and client access to emergency food. This navigation is especially important during unforeseen disruptions to local economies such as natural disasters, public health emergencies, or civic unrest.

The COVID-19 pandemic has placed tremendous strain on food resources and distribution nationally ranging from empty grocery store shelves, to disruption of school lunch programs, to an unprecedented strain on foodbanks and pantries. Supportive and affordable housing, homeless service and other health and human service partners are seeing spikes in need among the people they serve. Case managers and volunteers who deliver food to residents with access challenges are stretched very thin. People with fixed incomes, disabilities and/or chronic health challenges are acutely impacted by compounding factors like inadequate food storage space for a supply lasting one to two weeks, challenges related to transportation, product availability due to hoarding by the general public, and long lines at food distribution points. Similarly, these challenges are particularly heightened for families with small children and aging residents.

Supportive and affordable housing partners, case managers, and resident service coordinators are skilled at navigating community resources and building collaborative relationships. Individual service providers can create linkages and map out options for their clients.

Given the scale of the current crisis, some jurisdictions have started to create systemic approaches to increase efficiency and equity of access.

THREE-STEP APPROACH

A three-step approach can help you understand your local system to support your residents. The additional context that follows is intended to help you familiarize yourself with the sector and how it works.

1. MAP OUT YOUR RESOURCES

Locate on a map the closest:

- **Feeding American Food Bank**
Use their online tool here: <https://www.feedingamerica.org/find-your-local-foodbank>.
- **Private/Faith-Based Food Pantry**
These could be large organizations such as St. Vincent de Paul or The Salvation Army, or smaller local organizations or churches.
- **Public School Site**
This is particularly important for providers that work with families and children, but may be playing a larger role in the current crisis.

2. BUILD RELATIONSHIPS

- Contact and build a relationship with the staff at these agencies. Ensure you understand their capacity. Tour sites if appropriate and possible so you can describe the experience to your clients.

3. DEVELOP COORDINATED APPROACHES

- The Emergency Food System is a mature system with complex resources and approaches to work. You may be able partner effectively as an individual agency or case manager, however, it may be more productive and efficient over time to consider collaborative approaches using associations or task forces, coordinating with municipal or county staff, coordinating with offices of emergency management or state agencies.
- Consider how federal and state funding can be leveraged. Newly authorized stimulus funding augments existing resources and can be leveraged with philanthropic and private resources to develop new ways of meeting the need.

HISTORIC CONTEXT

The idea of food banks was originated in the United States in Phoenix, Arizona when St. Mary's Food Bank opened in 1967. Beforehand, emergency food assistance was organized and administered piece-meal with large efforts coming from the faith community. The food pantry, available to congregants in need, provided an immediate form of judgment-free, no-barrier assistance. This philosophy still dominates how many food pantries operate today, and the faith community continues to be a significant stakeholder.

Fast forwarding forty years, America's Second Harvest merged with Foodchain and later formed [Feeding America](#) in 2005. Based in Chicago, Feeding America has become the primary umbrella nonprofit for over 200 food banks in North America. While each of the Food America food banks are independently operated, they assist and coordinate federal food resources, public policy, and link national corporate partnerships to local food banks. In addition to food banks, local schools are primary access points for emergency food through the National School Lunch Program. 95% of America's schools participate in this program and feed more than 30 million children a day.

A FEDERALLY DRIVEN SYSTEM

One way to understand the emergency food system is by looking at **federal funding streams**, which accounts for the vast majority of the emergency food system. Please also note that while [The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children \(WIC\)](#) and [The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program \(SNAP\)](#) are not considered part of the emergency food system, they are critical parts of the Emergency Food benefits. They are also more typically familiar to case management due to the role they play during normal course of business.

OTHER FEDERAL FOOD PROGRAMS

- [The Emergency Food Assistance Program \(TEFAP\)](#):
TEFAP is a source of federal commodities (or the old "government cheese"). It provides food banks with protein and produce. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) will purchase excess supply from farmers and ranchers and it goes to the hungry.
- [Commodity Supplemental Food Program \(CSFP\)](#):
CSFP provides food for senior citizens in the form of food boxes and some congregate meals. Many of the food banks that deliver TEFAP also use CSFP. This is part of the Farm Bill.
- **Home Delivered Meals or [Meals on Wheels](#)**:
Food for senior citizens funded through Community Development Block Grants and the Older American Food Act (plus some Medicaid waivers). These can be administered by a number of different organizations.
- [National School Lunch Program](#):
This program provides reimbursement for breakfast and lunch served to low-income students. The largest nutrition program for children and the number one emergency food program for low-income children, it is part of the Farm Bill. *To give a sense of scale, New York City Public Schools produce more meals daily than any organization in the United States with the exception of the Armed Forces.*
- [Summer Food Service Program](#):
Also part of the Farm Bill and for feeding low-income children, it is funded through a different source than the National School Lunch Program. It also has only one meal per

day, although there can be exceptions, and in the current environment there are efforts to relax some of the typical restrictions around this and other federal programs. Schools are tapping into this program to feed students during the pandemic.

KEY ORGANIZATIONS

FOOD BANKS

The Feeding America umbrella includes food banks that receive federal assistance and are required to comply with USDA audits. Feeding America also works with private grocery stores to help with “grocery rescue” programs, the primary source of food for food banks and food pantries, as well as other food sources (i.e., Starbucks and Tyson Chicken) to keep food available at food banks. Feeding America Food Banks are part of our country’s Emergency Response System and can be activated by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). They also may be part of a National Guard activation.

FOOD PANTRIES

Food banks work with local food pantries to distribute directly to individuals. For example, in Arizona, there are four Feeding America food banks that cover the entire state. These four work with about 1,000 food pantries to distribute food. *A note on language: when food pantries talk about ‘distributing food’ it typically means distribution at the pantry and does not often include delivery or distribution to people’s homes.*

FAITH-BASED AND PRIVATE NON-FEDERAL PARTNERS

The biggest examples in this category are St. Vincent de Paul and the Salvation Army. Technically, these massive organizations are food pantries, but many of them look like and operate like food banks. Others are smaller but may have significant local capacity. The big difference between these organizations and food banks is that they do not receive federal food and do not have to comply with federal regulations. They can and do participate in grocery rescue programs. They often have greater capacity to marshal volunteer services. They may have greater flexibility to create partnerships, target their work more specifically, and provide accompanying services.

SCHOOLS

Schools provide a tremendous amount of nutritional assistance and have been a key player in municipal responses in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. There are efforts to create greater flexibility both with federal funding streams and with supplemental local funding intended to reach the broader community.

CONGREGATE MEAL SITES

Congregate sites offer meals served in community settings such as senior centers, soup kitchens, churches or senior housing developments. They may offer socialization opportunities beyond nutritional assistance. Most sites offer one or two meals a day focusing on lunch or dinner although some offer breakfast or a full complement.