

COVID-19 Best Practice Information: Food Banks

Background

- This document describes the best practices for jurisdictions to manage food banks during the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic.
- Food banks across the country are facing sharp increases in demand and decreases in food supply as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Food banks also face challenges with volunteer shortages. Many organizations have volunteer bases comprised largely of individuals over the age of 60, a group that has been identified as more vulnerable to the COVID-19 pandemic.¹
- The following is a list of key findings and considerations for jurisdictions and communities regarding ongoing COVID-19 pandemic operations across the country. These are best practices for consideration and do not constitute and should not be considered as guidance in any way.²

Key Considerations

- Food banks can prepackage food items and hold drive-thru distributions to ensure workers, volunteers, and the people they serve adhere to social distancing guidelines.
- Food banks can partner with restaurants, schools, or private and non-profit organizations to increase their workforce, community reach, and food supply during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Centralized information sources online or through a common phone number, like 211, can provide information regarding county or city food banks, such as locations, hours, contact information, and if delivery is available. This can increase the accessibility of these resources.
- Foodbanks operating during the COVID-19 public health emergency should work diligently to create a safe space for volunteers, workers, and clients by following [CDC guidelines](#) for communities, schools, workplaces, and events. The Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture's Bureau of Food Assistance also had a few helpful tips:³

¹ 2020 The Washington Post, Food banks are seeing volunteers disappear and supplies evaporate as coronavirus fears mount, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/03/16/food-banks-are-seeing-volunteers-disappear-food-supply-evaporate-coronavirus-fears-mount/>

² This document contains references and links to non-federal resources and organizations. This information is meant solely for informational purposes and is not intended to be an endorsement of any non-federal entity by FEMA, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, or the U.S. government.

³ 2020 Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture, COVID-19 (Novel Coronavirus) Prevention Practices for Food Banks and Food Pantries, <https://www.agriculture.pa.gov/Documents/COVID-19%20Guidance%20for%20Food%20Assistance%20Agencies.pdf>



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- Clean frequently used objects, such as volunteer check-in stations, and handles on carts (if grocery carts are used). Avoid sharing items like pens which are touched by many people.
- Request that sick clients remain at home and encourage healthy friends or neighbors to pick up food packages instead.
- Limit the number of admitted individuals per session when implementing an appointment system; if the demand continues to grow, consider adding more appointment times instead of expanding sessions.

Lessons Learned Related to Food Bank Coordination

Worker, Volunteer, and Client Safety

- **Potential Best Practice:** Food banks have adjusted types of food packing and methods of distribution to adhere to social distancing guidelines, for example:
 - The Capital Area Food Bank has switched to providing pre-bagged or boxed shelf-stable items. The food bank has doubled the usual quantity of food that it distributes to reduce client trips to program locations.⁴
 - Member food banks of Feeding America have added mobile or drive-through distributions, scheduled appointments, and suggested that only one member of a family should visit distribution points.⁵
 - At a drive-through distribution point in Pittsburgh, people have been asked to remain in their cars and unlock their trunks or backseat doors so that volunteers can place food in the car.⁶
 - Workers who are distributing food in the Boulder Valley School District in Colorado are divided into teams who serve on separate shifts so that the workers only interact with people on their shift. Additionally, workers receive daily temperature checks and participate in video check-ins with a nurse every morning.⁷
 - Guidance from the California Association of Food Banks recommends considering an appointment system in which individuals wait in their cars for a text message to alert them when it is their turn to pick up food, instead of standing in line.⁸

⁴ 2020 Capital Area Food Bank, Capital Area Food Bank Mobilizes to Keep Feeding Children and Families as Area Schools Close Due to COVID-19, <https://www.capitalareafoodbank.org/newsroom/press-releases/capital-area-food-bank-mobilizes-to-keep-feeding-children-and-families-as-area-schools-close-due-to-covid-19/>

⁵ 2020 AGDAILY, Feeding America establishes COVID-19 Response Fund, <https://www.agdaily.com/news/feeding-america-covid-19-response-fund/>

⁶ 2020 Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, Next drive-thru food distribution scheduled today in Duquesne, <https://www.post-gazette.com/life/food/2020/04/06/drive-thru-food-distribution-Duquesne-greater-pittsburgh-community-food-bank/stories/202004060060>

⁷ 2020 NPR, Children May Miss Meals As School Food Service Workers Fall Ill, <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/04/03/826882227/children-may-miss-meals-as-school-food-service-workers-fall-ill>

⁸ 2020 California Association of Food Banks, COVID-19 Prevention Practices For Food Banks & Food Pantries, <http://www.cafoodbanks.org/blog/covid-19-prevention-practices-food-banks-food-pantries>

Workforce and Partnerships

- **Potential Best Practice:** The Atlanta Community Food Bank is working with schools by providing additional weekly food distributions to 20 sites across five school districts. The number of sites where food is being distributed continues to grow.⁹
- **Potential Best Practice:** The organization Northwest Harvest has called for additional volunteers among high school seniors, college students, and furloughed workers, creating a workforce that can address the increasing need for food distribution services.¹⁰
- **Potential Best Practice:** The organization Food Rescue US provides a platform to match last-minute food donations with volunteers who can deliver them to local charities.¹¹
- **Potential Best Practice:** In a partnership between the Texas Governor’s Public Safety Office, the Texas Network of Family and Youth Success Programs, Favor Delivery, and the Texas Restaurant Association and the Comfort Food Care Package (CFCP) program allows participating restaurants to offer CFCPs for patrons to purchase on behalf of families and youth in need. Each care package contains enough food to feed a family of 5 to 6 and will be delivered to recipients’ homes.¹²
- **Potential Best Practice:** A food bank in Fort Worth, Texas has switched from a volunteer staffing model to paid staff, many of whom were recently laid off from work.¹³
 - The food bank is also collaborating with AmeriCorps to recruit more employees who will be paid by AmeriCorps.
- **Potential Best Practice:** Amid a shortage of volunteers in Michigan, the National Guard is helping a Feeding America food bank with food packing and distribution.¹⁴
- **Potential Best Practice:** In anticipation of further reduction in the food bank workforce, the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture Bureau of Food Assistance recommends cross-training staff for essential positions required to sustain operations.**Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Increasing Accessibility

- **Potential Best Practice:** The Atlanta Community Food Bank offers a text-based tool for locating food pantries. Individuals can text “FINDFOOD” for English responses (“COMIDA” for Spanish responses) to a helpline, where they can provide their zip code or address to enable location services for nearby pantries.⁹

⁹ 2020 Atlanta Community Food Bank, COVID-19 Response, <https://acfb.org/covid-19-response>

¹⁰ 2020 The Washington Post, Food banks are seeing volunteers disappear and supplies evaporate as coronavirus fears mount, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/03/16/food-banks-are-seeing-volunteers-disappear-food-supply-evaporate-coronavirus-fears-mount/>

¹¹ 2020 PCMA, Venues, Organizers Donating Food From Meetings Canceled Due to COVID-19, <https://www.pcma.org/covid-19-coronavirus-donating-food-canceled-meetings/>

¹² 2020 Office of the Texas Governor, Governor Abbott Announces Comfort Food Care Packages For Texas Youth And Families, <https://gov.texas.gov/news/post/governor-abbott-announces-comfort-food-care-packages-for-texas-youth-and-families>

¹³ 2020 Fort Worth, COVID-19 Impact: Food Bank Shuts Down Volunteers, Recruits Paid Staff, <https://fwtx.com/news/covid-impact-tarrant-area-food-bank-shuts-down-volunteer-sta/>

¹⁴ 2020 National Guard, Michigan National Guard expands support of food banks, <https://www.nationalguard.mil/News/Article/2138139/michigan-national-guard-expands-support-of-food-banks/>

- **Potential Best Practice:** A submission in a COVID-19 hackathon in Sweden proposed the usage of a helpline number that the elderly can call for tasks such as grocery shopping. After providing their zip code, the platform, “Telehelp,” will assign a local volunteer to assist. A similar model can be adopted for food banks, where individuals who do not have access to smartphones or computers can call for assistance in acquiring food items.¹⁵
- **Potential Best Practice:** Stockton, California compiled and shared the locations, hours, and contact information of senior lunch programs and food banks in the area on a web-based shared document platform on the city’s COVID-19 information and resource center [website](#).¹⁶
- **Potential Best Practice:** The Los Angeles County/City Elder Nutrition Program has released a [map](#) of locations where older individuals can send family members or friends under 65 years of age to pick up meals. Contact information is also provided for each location, so that individuals can request delivery if necessary.¹⁷
- **Potential Best Practice:** Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, has an online resource that provides a [map](#) of food distribution locations, and links for individuals seeking information on Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or 412 Food Rescue resources.¹⁸

Logistics and Resources

- **Strength** Legally responsible state, local, tribal, and territorial governments may enter into formal agreements or contracts with private organizations, including private nonprofit (PNP) organizations such as food banks, to purchase and distribute food when necessary as an emergency protective measure in response to the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency. In these cases, public assistance (PA) funding is provided to the legally responsible government entity, which would then reimburse the private organization for the cost of providing those services under the agreement or contract. When necessary as an emergency protective measure, eligible work related to the purchase and distribution of food in response to the COVID-19 pandemic includes:¹⁹
 - Purchasing, packaging, and/or preparing food, including food commodities, fresh foods, shelf-stable food products, and prepared meals;
 - Delivering food, including hot and cold meals if necessary, to distribution points and/or individuals, when conditions constitute a level of severity that food is not easily accessible for purchase; and
 - Leasing distribution and storage space, vehicles, and necessary equipment.
- **Potential Best Practice:** MANNA FoodBank, a member of Feeding America, provides an online form for food

¹⁵ 2020 Guaana, Telehelp – Bridge the Digital Divide,

<https://www.guaana.com/challenge/PtcJCi8E7rhiW6GrD/results/er3wYvEj4d5L6bszi/z9kbWypzHz7FFatnS/main>

¹⁶ 2020 #StocktonStrong, I’m worried about food, <https://www.stocktonstrong.org/food-2/>

¹⁷ 2020 WDACS, Coronavirus (COVID-19), <https://wdacs.lacounty.gov/covid-19/>

¹⁸ 2020 Allegheny County, Free Resource Distribution Sites,

<https://alcogis.maps.arcgis.com/apps/MapSeries/index.html?appid=abaca148492b47a7ad0d5a71f5d2c5e8>

¹⁹ 2020 FEMA News Release, Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic: Purchase and Distribution of Food Eligible for Public Assistance, <https://www.fema.gov/news-release/2020/04/12/coronavirus-covid-19-pandemic-purchase-and-distribution-food-eligible-public>

banks to request refrigerators and freezers that have been donated by individuals or corporate partners.²⁰

- **Potential Best Practice:** Food Rescue US has turned to establishments (e.g. college campuses, convention centers, restaurants) that are donating food to assist with long-term food storage as well. Some individuals have reached out to offer vans and box trucks for transportation.²²
- **Potential Best Practice:** Excess meals from cancelled conferences and events can be donated to food banks.²¹
- **Potential Best Practice:** Restaurants that close as a result of a pandemic can allow employees to take home perishables, and any remaining food can be donated to local organizations.²²

Topics for the “Best Practices” series are generated from crowd sourced suggestions. Have an idea? Let us research it! Organizations and individuals can e-mail best practices or lessons learned to fema-cipsupport@fema.dhs.gov.

²⁰ n.d. MANNA FoodBank, Refrigerator/Freezer Request Form, <https://www.mannafoodbank.org/agency-access-and-information/refrigeratorfreezer-request-form/>.

²¹ 2020 PBS, How to help others in the COVID-19 crisis, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/health/how-to-help-others-in-the-covid-19-crisis>

²² 2020 Eater, America’s Restaurants Are Closing. What’s Happening to the Food?, <https://www.eater.com/2020/3/17/21181403/restaurants-combat-food-waste-amid-coronavirus-by-donating-to-food-banks>