

The COVID-19 Crisis and Food in Jefferson County, Colorado

Food insecurity is associated with poor, long-term health and wellbeing outcomes, including asthma, hypertension, diabetes, and poor emotional health.^{1,2} The issue of food security in America was amplified by the onset of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic in March 2020. The number of unemployed Americans rose from 6.2 million in February 2020 to 20.5 million in May 2020,³ and initial research indicated a nearly one-third increase in household food insecurity.⁴ Additionally, research suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic has amplified existing disparities related to food security status, especially for non-Hispanic Black and Hispanic individuals.⁵

Food insecurity is defined as the disruption of food intake or eating patterns because of lack of money and other resources.

In Colorado, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, 9.1% of Coloradans and 10% of Jefferson County residents were experiencing food insecurity.⁶ Data from Hunger Free Colorado has demonstrated that since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, this percentage has quadrupled – with 38% (or almost 2 in 5) of Coloradans experiencing food insecurity as of December 2020.⁷

Stakeholders throughout the Jefferson County food system responded quickly to this growing public health concern. As this emergency response evolved, it became clear that a better understanding of the response's strengths and challenges was needed. Therefore, in the summer of 2020, a qualitative research project was conducted with food assistance organizations contributing to the emergency food response during COVID-19. This project aimed to understand the capacity of Jefferson County's food assistance organizations to meet the needs of residents experiencing food insecurity during an emergency. The project consisted of fourteen interviews with representatives from food assistance organizations throughout Jefferson County, with two researchers conducting the interviews via phone and a web-based video conferencing tool. The data was analyzed to develop themes across the interviews, and member checking of the themes was conducted with interviewees and the Jefferson County Food Policy Council to increase the credibility of the findings.

Findings

Increased Food Insecurity. All interviewees described a significant increase in the number of residents being served. One interviewee shared that "Before COVID, a busy month was a month where we served 800 individuals. Now a busy month is a month where we're serving 3000 individuals."

Removal of Barriers. Many interviewees reported ways in which barriers to receiving food assistance services were removed. Organizations described eliminating income, identification, and geographical requirements in order to serve residents in need. Notably, interviewees described how removing barriers also increased trust with the residents they served, reducing concerns about stigma and the Public Charge rule.

"We used to have an income limit; we no longer do. We used to serve a specific area...; no longer the case. We used to ask for people to provide some sort of proof, and we're not doing that, and honestly moving forward, we won't be doing that anymore. So, food assistance is really available to whoever needs it, for whatever reason they need it."

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Concerns about Winter. Many interviewees expressed concerns about the approaching winter months, including staff and volunteer safety and availability and sufficient food procurement. Interviewees described safety concerns for staff and volunteer working in inclement weather conditions, such as snow, ice, and cold.

“People are on ice and they are volunteers... and we barely have enough volunteers and things now much less after it gets to the bad weather.”

Interviewees also pointed to the end of certain federal programs, such as the Coronavirus Food Assistance Program (CFAP), as well as reductions in donations and funding opportunities.

Inadequate Transportation and Storage. Interviewees consistently reported inadequate transportation and storage capacity for food assistance services. Regarding transportation, reliability was a key concern as much transportation was being completed by volunteers or via personal or reduced rate rental vehicles. Regarding storage, organizations described a patchwork of storage facilities, including old and unreliable residential refrigerators and freezers, rented units, and repurposed and borrowed spaces. Two interviewees shared that classrooms and conference rooms at their organization had been transformed into food storage rooms.

Safety over Choice. Finally, many interviewees reported adjusting program models to integrate COVID-19-related safety precautions. Organizations shifted to drive through models, loading pre-packaged boxes directly into residents’ cars, or delivered food directly to residents’ homes. These adjusted models increased staff and client safety, however, they also significantly reduced residents’ choice and preference in the type of food received.

“Our food pantry, prior to pandemic times, we had a choice shopping model and through the pandemic, obviously felt like we needed to transition that for safety purposes into a drive thru food model.”

References

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7. Hunger Free Colorado. COVID Survey: Hunger Remains a Top Priority.; 2020. <https://www.hungerfreecolorado.org/covid-hunger-survey> This is the body copy style - it can be found in the paragraph style called [Basic Paragraph].

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