

COVID-19 RESPONSE IN CITIES:

Supporting Nutrition Programs and Emergency Food Assistance to Prevent Hunger

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, more than 37 million people across the United States, including more than [11 million children](#), lived in a food-insecure household, meaning they lacked consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy lifestyle. Feeding America has [estimated](#) that an additional 17.1 million Americans will become food insecure as a result of the economic consequences of the pandemic. Ensuring access to food for all population groups has always been a key concern for city leaders. As cities continue to respond to the pandemic and its health and economic shockwaves, it is vital to revisit and bolster food access plans via the following steps.

1 Create or strengthen community food intake request systems.

To understand hunger within your city and identify ways to meet residents' needs, local leaders can take steps to create or modify your intake request system. This system can be built on an established model like 211 or 311 hotlines either within city government or through a partnership with your local United Way. For example, the [City of Framingham, MA](#) created a dedicated hotline number in response to the pandemic to connect residents to service providers, volunteers, and vendors that can help meet food needs. As cities continue to rethink services and staffing, they can reassign city staff to manage the hotline or make direct calls to residents to assess their needs and connect them with services. Some cities have realigned their youth employment programs to put young people to work calling residents to identify their food needs.

The [City of Lincoln, NE](#) added information about food assistance to MyLNK, a comprehensive city web app for services. No matter what types of services residents are seeking, MyLNK connects them to one-stop information about food assistance services.

2 Increase access to food for high-need populations, including people of color, low-income residents, youth, seniors and college students

From the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, children and youth in many cities have been home from school in order to stay safe. For millions of students, school closures and remote learning have cut off access to their primary (and perhaps only) meals of the day. Cities and school districts across the country met this challenge by utilizing U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) child nutrition waivers that allow for greater flexibility in meal distribution. In October, the USDA extended these waivers for meal programs that serve children and youth through June 30, 2021. These waivers have allowed cities to: provide “grab and go” meals; distribute meals for multiple days at one time; serve all youth within communities instead of verifying enrollment in a particular school; and allow guardians to pick up meals on behalf of youth.

The [City of Little Rock, AR](#) is providing children and youth with lunch, dinner and next-day breakfast at sites across the city. The city expanded this service by providing lunch on weekends as well.

As school districts work to keep students engaged in learning, local leaders can consider adding food resources to community learning hubs. As explained in this NLC [resource](#), these hubs provide access to technology and the internet for distance learning, safe and quiet places to study, adult mentorship and tutoring, as well as the comprehensive wrap-around services that youth and families need to be successful.

In addition to a focus on children and youth, city leaders are working to ease the pandemic’s impact on food security for seniors. Early in the pandemic, cities across the country sought to make sure seniors were not alone and were receiving the food that they needed, chiefly through partnerships and coordination with area food banks and Meals on Wheels programs. Additionally, many cities such as the [City of Fremont, CA](#) worked with local grocery stores to create senior hours so this vulnerable population could access food in person or via pick-up with limited crowds.

For cities with a college or university in their jurisdiction, one strategy for getting food assistance to populations in need is to connect campuses with the local or regional pantry network. Many colleges across the country have started a food pantry on campus with assistance from the [College and University Food Bank Alliance](#). As a part of its broader [Think Orange](#) campaign to fight hunger, the [City of Winston-Salem, NC](#) and Winston-Salem State University developed an on-campus food bank to serve the 57 percent of students identified as food-insecure.

3 Leverage partnerships to connect residents to federal nutrition benefits.

Research shows that many families across the country do not use the full amount of federal benefits for which they are eligible. In addition, the pandemic has pushed many more families to seek assistance who never had to navigate the public benefits system before. City leaders can play a critical role in keeping residents from going hungry simply by raising the visibility of public nutrition benefits, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance program (SNAP) and the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program. Using city communication channels and working with community partners, cities can spread the word about the availability of these benefits (for example, by adding information about them to the resource pages of the city's website) and make sure service providers are disseminating clear, up-to-date information on how to access these critical supports. In addition, where possible cities can work with the local school district to promote the [Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer](#) (P-EBT) program, which is designed to provide access to food for families with children while schools are closed. Cities also can support caregivers and parents of eligible children to receive meals under the [National School Lunch Program](#) to access these benefits.

4 Support restaurant workers and local producers.

According to [Yelp](#), 19,590 restaurants across the country have closed permanently because of the pandemic. To slow this trend, local leaders can consider contracting with restaurants at risk of closure to provide meals for seniors or organizations providing services to residents in need, such as [homeless shelters](#). The **City of Asheville, NC** suspended portions of its [city code](#) to allow mobile food vendors to operate in otherwise unpermitted locations during its declared state of emergency. Another creative approach is to encourage the hiring of restaurant workers who have been laid off to increase staffing of community kitchens or other vendors that are producing meals for youth, homebound older adults, people of color, and low-income communities.

Local leaders also should consider maximizing [community kitchens](#) for meal production where possible. This can be done by reappropriating space such as unused senior centers into community kitchens or working with school districts to use school kitchens or kitchen hub locations for the creation of meals. In reimagining these spaces, local leaders can ensure that public health guidelines are followed and supported. Cities leaders in large urban areas can also engage companies like Lyft to leverage their partnerships with nonprofits to deliver meals to seniors.

Local food producers may also be struggling during the pandemic. When possible, city leaders can source the efforts described above as well as community-prepared food boxes for those in need from local food producers. This strategy also allows the food that is distributed to be supportive of community tastes and interests.

5 Support and streamline transportation of food.

The social distancing precautions related to COVID-19 have created numerous complications and barriers when it comes to getting food to individuals. In both rural and urban regions of the country, local leaders are working with school districts to create school bus routes to drop off prepared school meals. In some communities, enrollment data are being used to add drop-off points to maximize the number of children and youth served.

City leaders are also forming public-private partnerships to get more food to their residents' doorsteps. The [City of Rancho Cordova, CA](#) provides free grocery delivery to residents living within the city via its [Rancho Delivers program](#), a partnership between the city and two supermarkets where the city covers the delivery costs. Additionally, the U.S. Department of Agriculture has expanded its [SNAP online purchasing pilot](#) across the country. The program allows SNAP recipients to use their benefits with approved online retailers and receive fresh produce and groceries at their door. (One important note: SNAP does not cover any delivery fee the retailer may charge.)

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