



# **CHARLOTTESVILLE COVID-19 EMERGENCY FOOD RESPONSE**

## Lessons Learned Review

A Joint Project of Cultivate Charlottesville  
Food Justice Network and the UVA  
Humanitarian Collaborative

**JANUARY 2021**



# Executive Summary

## Introduction

This review captures the lessons learned and best practices in equity-based response strategies used or developed during the early and mid-term phases of the pandemic in the Charlottesville area with regard to community food security, from March through early fall 2020. The report examines operational and system-wide responses from the Charlottesville Food Justice Network (FJN) member and partner organizations and community leaders with a focus on building racial equity into the framework of the local response. The report identifies what equity-based strategies FJN partners and members used and/or developed, what challenges the organizations faced or are facing, what concerns and gaps remain for the community, and what recommendations stakeholders have as the pandemic and response continues to evolve. It emphasizes equitable strategies that focus on prioritizing Black and brown communities due to the disproportionate impact that both food insecurity and the pandemic has had on these populations of people.

This report can be used as a tool for community service providers to develop accountability practices for upholding the principles of food justice. With respect to food security, identifying equity-based response strategies allows those in charge of emergency response to hold themselves accountable to the principles of food justice. We hope it can be a helpful tool to address the disparities in the local food systems. The disproportionate impacts of COVID-19 on minority populations suggests that our work in ensuring equity-based food distribution must also prioritize the same population. Equitable and efficient distribution provides resources to where the impact is the largest.

More specifically, this report aims to:

1. **Summarize the key adaptations and response efforts** made by community organizations and mutual aid groups working with Cultivate Charlottesville Food Justice Network in the Charlottesville area due to the COVID-19 pandemic and shutdown as reported by the review participants.
2. **Identify the top response strategies** that organizations and mutual aid groups used that were most successful in **developing an equity-based response and recovery** in Charlottesville, focusing on those most impacted by food security prior to the pandemic and those most impacted by the pandemic and shutdown.
3. **Identify what challenges or gaps remain** and what changes to coordination and support from partners or agencies could improve organizational ability to respond to food security



needs of the most food insecure and the most under-represented as the pandemic continues.

4. **Provide recommendations** for stakeholders to consider in the future.

## Review Methods

The team consulted with the advisory committee to develop the review goals and strategy. The review team and advisory committee decided to conduct **focus groups** and a digital **survey**. This information was then transcribed and synthesized into four areas: **operational adaptations; equity-based strategies and successes; challenges, gaps and concerns; and recommendations**. The findings derived from a sample size or analysis as to be statistically relevant. They are a synthesis of community-based partner and leader input.

## Key Findings

**Operational adaptations** that organizations made were extensive and included such activities as developing home delivery systems, developing and executing an emergency information sharing strategy, establishing entirely new food programming and collaborations. They are detailed in the body of the report on page 32.

## Equity-based Response Strategies

The table below details the equity-based response strategies described during the review process. The Equity-based Response Strategies Checklist was developed using resources from other communities and the locally developed FJN Equity Framework. The equity-based response strategies were grouped according to six of the core elements of the Equity Framework, namely: strong communities, justice and fairness, healthy people, culture and identity, vibrant farms, thriving local economies, and emerging strategies. The Checklist is included in Appendix I and the Equity Framework is referenced below in Figure 2.

**Table 1: Examples of Equitable Response Strategies Used by Partners**

<b>Strong Communities</b>	
Partner with community stakeholders to define a vision for success.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ The vision for Charlottesville Community Cares was mobilized as part of the group's grounding principles and racial equity framework which has been developed alongside the community from prior years of community feedback and organizing.</li> <li>✓ Feedback from Crescent Halls residents informed the development of community testing and wrap around services program.</li> </ul>
Develop a process that ensures alignment with the	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Partners developed a stakeholder steering committee that used the FJN equity framework to establish operating</li> </ul>

shared values and the shared vision of success (the outcome).	<p>values, guidelines, and goals of a new, emergency food assistance program that emerged during the pandemic.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Established a multi-partner, multi-pronged response plan and program to provide wrap-around support for low income community members that test positive and need support to recover and self-isolate.</li> </ul>
Assign clear responsibility for adhering to shared values.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Partners and steering committee members from different response groups met regularly to provide progress updates and accountability to goals. They used reporting and indicator dashboards as tools for measuring success.</li> </ul>
Identify community needs and assets, as well as pre-existing vulnerability and resilience.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Invested in community representatives (financially and with capacity building) to act as liaisons and advocate between organizations and community members.</li> <li>✓ Prioritized local businesses, especially Black and brown businesses, to prepare community meals.</li> <li>✓ Acknowledged histories of discrimination when creating a robust communications plan and comprehensive wrap around model to support families affected by a COVID positive diagnosis.</li> </ul>
Build methods of collecting direct feedback on services into organizational work plans.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Many organizations described ways that they solicit and use participant feedback through surveys, word of mouth or community navigators.</li> </ul>
Empower communities to make decisions for their communities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ A number of organizations worked with community representatives, people living or working in focus neighborhoods, compensating them to provide real time input on their service delivery and quality. Sometimes called community collaborators or community navigators, these individuals provided many other important and essential functions in the emergency response as well, such as outreach, trust building, and reciprocity.</li> <li>✓ Developed response plans with members of the neighborhood or housing community in focus.</li> </ul>

## Justice and Fairness

Prioritize support to communities most at risk or most vulnerable.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Partners were primarily already serving those most at risk.</li> <li>✓ One organization shifted resources from providing food to healthcare workers to provide food to neighborhoods with a high prevalence of food insecurity.</li> </ul>
“Preference” to resources is given to those who will suffer disparate effects of the pandemic or other public health disasters so they can be protected from further harm.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Prioritized work with Black and brown businesses.</li> <li>✓ Focused on offering meal support to communities of color.</li> <li>✓ Spent time ensuring that community members were staying enrolled in government assistance programs like SNAP/WIC since dropping from enrollment is often a barrier for government assistance programs.</li> </ul>



Remove barriers to resource access, especially in emergency situations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Expanded access to information about available food resources through a free text messaging service.</li> <li>✓ Reduced the amount of paperwork required to receive support.</li> <li>✓ Relaxed requirements for in person food access- i.e., allowed proxy pick-ups for food, greatly expanding access to food.</li> <li>✓ Community leaders used social media to share information about meal support outreach.</li> <li>✓ Kept participants informed about what changes were made and got the information out to them proactively through flyers, calls, Facebook, community navigators, email, social media, etc.</li> <li>✓ Food Bank provided supplemental support to direct food providers and support their efforts.</li> <li>✓ Operations ramped up so that no one was waiting to receive meal delivery.</li> </ul>
Monitor your service activities and hold your organization accountable to its goals.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Reviewed response outcomes and metrics with the steering committee regularly.</li> </ul>
Provide community members with a safe system for airing grievances with service providers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Community representatives sometimes helped to air grievances on behalf of participants and buffered them from fear of retribution.</li> <li>✓ Legal aid helped to support the rights and interests of children in public schools receiving meals.</li> </ul>

## Healthy People

Ensure the food assistance provided is nutritious and healthful.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Had a nutritionist on staff to assist with meal planning.</li> <li>✓ Included as many fresh fruits and vegetables as possible in groceries deliveries.</li> <li>✓ Provided recipes and education to participants receiving food.</li> <li>✓ Tailored foods to health needs of participants, for example provide Ensure for seniors and soft foods for people experiencing homelessness.</li> </ul>
Ensure a household's lack of transportation does not hinder access to services/nutrition.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Provided home delivery or neighborhood-based pickups so people could shelter in place.</li> <li>✓ CCS used school buses to deliver meals to bus stops during the shelter in place order and while school was virtual.</li> </ul>
Address socioeconomic and geographical barriers to services.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ See above.</li> </ul>





Recognize that vulnerable communities need ongoing support.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Extended the duration of available support beyond the normal scope of service.</li> <li>✓ Many organizations fundraised to expand and extend meal support- for youth in the school system, for expanded direct food distribution to low-income participants and seniors, for example.</li> </ul>
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## Culture and Identity

Respect dietary restrictions, cultural diets, and dietary choices.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Used participant feedback to adjust meals being provided- such as Hallal, vegetarian, and other dietary restrictions.</li> <li>✓ Ensured that participant choice is available with new safety protocols - isolating gluten-free, vegan, and vegetarian foods, as well as food specifically for people experiencing homelessness.</li> </ul>
Provide accessible information about the services available to each community.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Community navigators helped their community members understand what resources were available, provided interpretations, answered questions, and built relationships with people to understand their needs.</li> <li>✓ Many organizations provided written translation of materials (mostly Spanish), or provided pictorial communication aids.</li> <li>✓ Some organizations provided interpreters for participants. (Spanish)</li> </ul>
Recognize subjectivities- Power relations, cultural contexts, and neighborhood dynamics.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Community representatives served as systems navigators and advocated for non-English-speaking families who had a preference for culturally appropriate foods.</li> <li>✓ Provided gift cards to the Charlottesville Latinx community regardless of immigration status through a partnership with Sin Barreras.</li> <li>✓ Acknowledged lack of trust between town/gown, large organizations/agencies or outside groups and having neighborhood-based groups/churches lead on outreach and front facing activities.</li> </ul>

## Vibrant Farms

Utilize emergency response strategies that support local farms.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Purchased locally sourced foods products for emergency food services.</li> </ul>
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## Thriving Local Economies

Develop emergency response strategies that support the local economy.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Purchased from local farms.</li> <li>✓ FLF/WCK model in Charlottesville prioritized local Black and brown restaurants for the meal program.</li> </ul>
Develop emergency response strategies that support minority-owned businesses.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ FLF/WCK model in Charlottesville prioritized local Black and brown restaurants for meal program.</li> </ul>
Track and report on the investments.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ WCK/FLF meal program developed a local outcome tracking dashboard to monitor the funds that were routed to Black and brown businesses.</li> </ul>

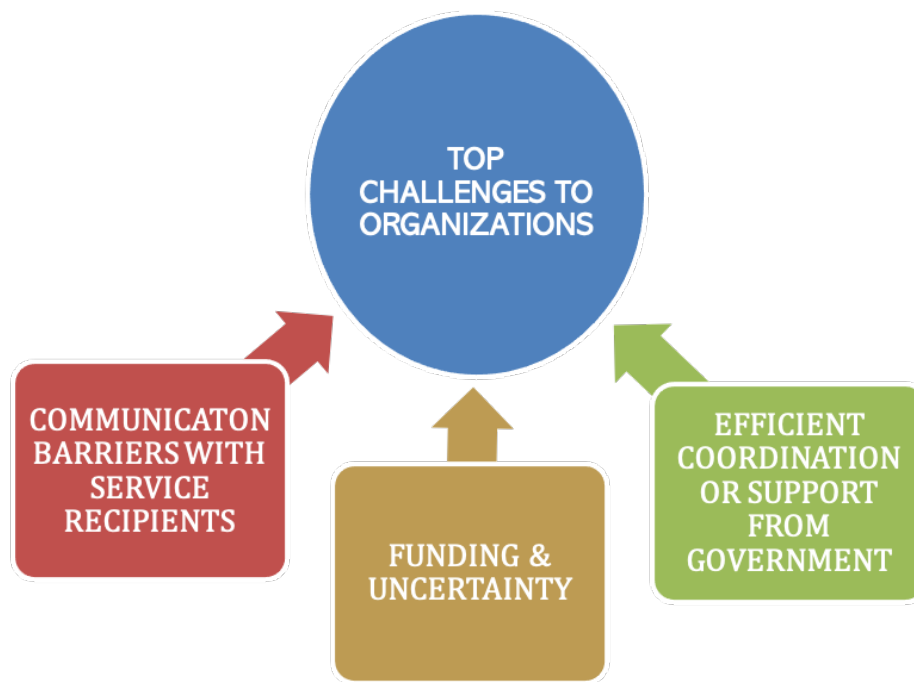
## Emerging Strategies

Prioritize and maintain actions that build community trust.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Offered reliability and consistency.</li> <li>✓ Learned community members names.</li> <li>✓ Worked with community leaders to establish support.</li> </ul>
Collaborate across groups to amplify efficacy, efficiency, and impact.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Established communication channels to support organizational needs and to share information with one another.</li> <li>✓ PB&amp;J Fund attributed its success to its ability to collaborate with organizations to get information out on enrolling families in free and reduced lunch, supporting meal distribution for kids, and receiving donations.</li> <li>✓ Cultivate Charlottesville highlighted an important strategy for reducing barriers to access of services. While supplying meals to CCS students when the city schools were on holiday, they made a point of using the existing system that CCS was using for delivering meals. This is notable because the food access landscape is so complicated by program providers often having their own eligibility criteria, their own schedule, their own community of focus, and their network. Simplifying the participant experience was critical to effective implementation especially in an emergency environment.</li> </ul>
Build off of systems that are already familiar to people.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ City Schoolyard Garden prioritized the meal distribution locations that the school district was already using. By leaning into something that already existed, they were able to maximize accessibility and simplify the systems that people have to navigate.</li> </ul>
Amplify pre-existing efforts when possible.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Find funding and support for existing mutual aid efforts instead of competing- such as FLF/WCK supporting Happy Saturdays.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Work to fill gaps rather than competing or duplicating – such as providing meals to youth when the schools are closed.</li> </ul>
Protect the safety of volunteers, staff and partners.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Shared and followed CDC and local guidelines such as utilizing protective masks and cleaning products to eliminate the spread of COVID.</li> <li>✓ Local Food Hub worked to ensure a healthy local community through partnering with local donors to provide masks in addition to their food supplies when possible, to help make following state guidelines easier for those who possibly could not afford a mask otherwise.</li> <li>✓ Provided online and YouTube training to volunteers to minimize congregating.</li> <li>✓ Shared PPE/cleaning supplies between organizations.</li> </ul>

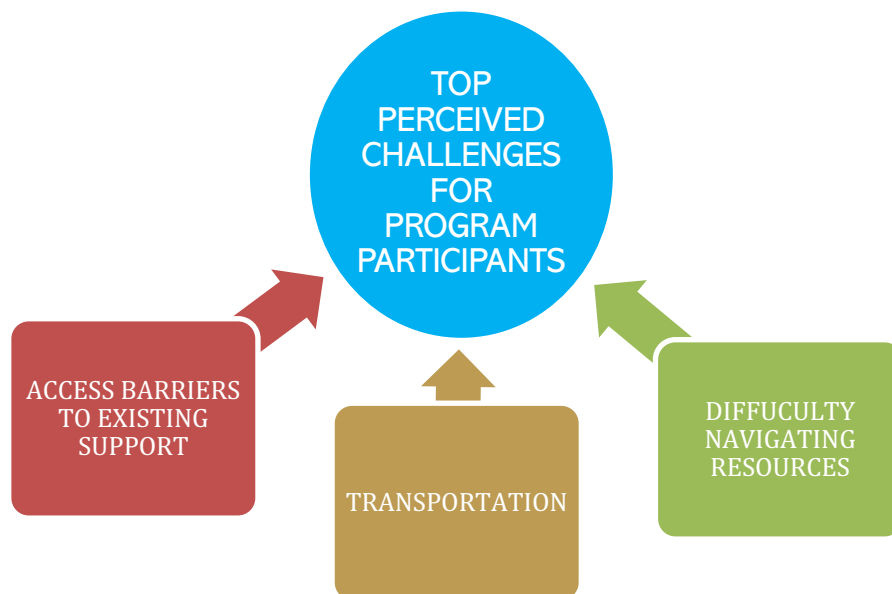
## Challenges to an Effective and Equity-based Response

**Figure 1:** Top Challenges to Organizations in COVID-19 Response





**Figure 2:** Top Perceived Challenges for Program Participants During COVID-19



### Awareness of and Access to Resources

Awareness of and access to resources was cited as a multi-faceted issue for both program partners and community representatives. Program participants faced communication barriers in finding out everything they needed. When the government shutdown, many participants thought all of the nonprofits they could go to for support were also closed. Additionally, many who were the focus audience for food access programs did not have access to some of the communication mediums many take for granted such as social media and email. Several organizations noted that outreach was conducted primarily through online platforms or by phone, but many people experiencing food insecurity do not always keep the same phone number.

Another challenge was that resources were challenging to navigate because providers offer their resources in so many different formats, on inconsistent schedules and locations, and with different eligibility requirements. It was often difficult for program partners to know what was available much less people needing to access those services.

Language remained a significant barrier for many families during food distribution. It was even brought up that having written translations was not sufficient as some immigrants in Charlottesville did not read in their native language and their children were left to act as interpreters. Program Partners were well aware of the challenge and took steps to offer more interpretation but this was expensive.

Several community representatives noted that these barriers give the appearance that some food resources are not for certain people which eroded community trust in the systems of support. The need for equal access to information and increased transparency in how and what food resources

are available was needed. The use of trusted community leaders was noted as a critical resource in addressing many of these issues, but this approach was only being used in limited programs.

## Funding & Uncertainty

See concerns section.

## Transportation and geographical barriers

Many groups described moving towards home delivery or at least a neighborhood-based pick-up delivery system to make it easier for people to access their supports and shelter in place. However, respondents listed inadequate public transportation and the cost of increasing fleet vehicles for improved delivery as ongoing challenges to eliminating geography as a barrier to access.

## Lack of Efficient Coordination Support from Emergency Operations Center and Government (EOC)

While the EOC appeared to have a clear strategy for providing PPE and other supplies to health care workers and health care facilities, there was not a clear or efficient strategy for supporting the organizations and other groups that provided essential services to the marginalized and vulnerable people in the community. The overnight shutdown truly illuminated that a plan to help keep food security organizations in operation really was needed. Particularly in the first two weeks of the shutdown, organizations were left to fend for themselves when it came to securing PPE, cleaning supplies, food, and volunteers to remain operational.

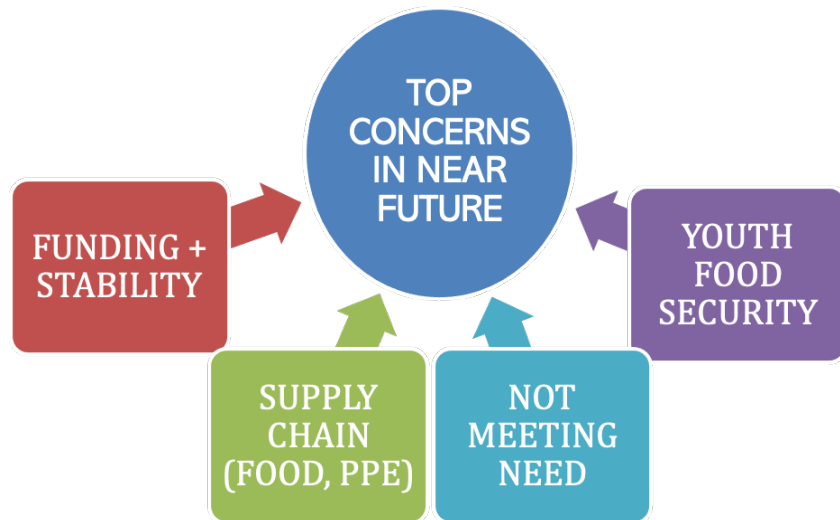
In any emergency, responders must prioritize their resources and serve the most vulnerable first. On the other hand, the organizations and groups supporting people experiencing food insecurity provide a vital service; if they are not operational, the community will find additional emergencies on their hands – hungry people, more sick people.

At one point, organizations reported being offered medically trained volunteers deployed by the EOC however these volunteers never materialized. However, the Medical Reserve Corps of volunteers offered by the EOC did support deliveries for wrap around services. At the time of this report, it is not known whether the EOC and its partners have conducted any sort of lessons learned review of its own to evaluate and improve upon its response plan for the future.

## Concerns for the Future

Concerns tracked closely to challenges, but also raised some additional points of focus. A few key areas that were discussed with more nuance are highlighted here.

**Figure 3:** Top Concerns in Near Future for Focus Group and Survey Participants



### Youth Food Security

Of particular note were concerns that youth were not having their food needs met and that there was a possible support cliff in summer time when school is out of session. During the pandemic, CCS provided meal delivery on school days, but community organizations needed to pick up meal delivery on holidays. Initially, CCS did not have plans to provide summer meals. This changed in March 2021 when USDA expanded free meal provisions, which will afford CCS the ability to continue meal delivery over summer 2021.

### Inadequate Assistance

There was a shared sense among focus group participants that every day, when people or families were dealing with food insecurity, that they are not able to deal as successfully with the root issues of their situation such as their job security or income stability. People also expressed concern that people were simply slipping through that cracks, not being found, not receiving help for one reason or another. This was reflected in the challenges section with ongoing barriers to access such as language, transportation and geography, and a mistrust of government agencies.

### Funding Stability

Funding was repeated as a concern, particularly the worry that as the pandemic stretches on, organizations will continue to run higher cost modified operations such as direct delivery or wrap around services for low-income families during quarantine. In addition to higher cost, there was concern that funder fatigue will set in and result in a drop-in support available to community, thus widening hunger gaps and exacerbating many other issues for families.

## Supply Chain

It is no secret that the pandemic has impacted the supply chain in many ways – as demonstrated via panic buying, grocery store rationing, and price gouging. The food supply chain, one of the largest components of the economy, is of particular concern and was impacted from production, to distribution, to the consumer. Ongoing concerns about PPE and long-term concerns about the fragility of the food system were repeatedly cited. Supporting local farmers and farm workers was discussed repeatedly as a necessary ongoing investment locally, as well as the difficulty of funding such endeavors in the emergency context. Some funders see this as secondary to emergency support or do not see the connection to food security at all.

## Recommendations

1. Formalize a food security information structure and plan that can be implemented in an emergency.

This structure was in part developed by the Food Justice Network in 2020 as a result of the pandemic and local shutdown. Expanding on this structure to include more stakeholders and to better connect the food security infrastructure to the local government and support systems is critical. Resources may be needed for a central organization to act as a key coordinator for logistics and information in emergency settings.

2. Engage local partners and government in expanding the use of compensated “community representatives” across organizations and governmental agencies.

Review participants repeatedly cited that working with community connectors (also called community representatives or community navigators) as one of the most successful components of the emergency food security response and recovery efforts. They were reported to possess the community relationships, knowledge, and trust that can help mitigate many of the barriers to access reported in the group. Connectors can help their communities build trust with program partners, hear about and understand what services are available to them, clarify confusion, advocate for the rights and needs of their communities, interpret information into the other languages, and understand cultural nuances that others simply cannot. They can also be important think partners in developing response and support plans, and increase accountability to communities being serviced which was repeatedly stated as a need.

Many organizations expressed the desire to expand upon this approach, but that financial resources are one barrier. It is recommended that local government and organizations prioritize an effort to explore how they might jointly invest in expanding this concept further.

Should such an effort expand, people in these roles should have access to fair pay, training and orientation to the principles of organizations, and equitable recovery like any other staff person.

3. Develop a sustained and coordinated youth meal program available to students when school is not in session.

A silver lining of the pandemic has been that it has shown us what we are capable of achieving and school meals was no exception. Many organizations came together to ensure that youth had access to food throughout the year including when school was not in session. It can be done, however a sustained, funded effort that is accessible to every child on free and reduced lunch in our community for summer and holiday meals has still not been formalized or funded. Partners are eager for CCS to take a leading role in these efforts, and are at the ready to support. Funding also exists for such an endeavor, but requires the full commitment of CCS and the city.

It is also recommended that providers to students look closely at how effective providing groceries to families have been. Two focus group participants noted that many children are left to prepare their own meals, but lack the cooking skills or circumstances to be able to make use of groceries.

4. Resurrect the Community Wide Resource List

The United Way used to maintain a comprehensive community resource list but reportedly discontinued it in 2020. Several organizations mentioned that such a resource is imperative for connecting people to resources, particularly when the support systems available are so varied and complicated. This resource list would be most useful if it was available online and was printable in different languages that program partners and healthcare providers alike could supply to residents of Charlottesville. It would also be helpful if providers could update it for hours and availability. Focus group participants mentioned that the Charlottesville Office of Human Rights may be compiling such a list. Additionally, operations in more “normal” times may be different than in an emergency contact. The keeper of a central resource list might consider this when developing a protocol for updating such a resource. At the time of the report the Food Justice Network had also launched a food resource texting service to share information about food access programs in the area in both English and Spanish which addresses one of the major challenges that people still do not know where to find food resources in our community.

5. Investigate opportunities to expand interpretation and transportation access.

Charlottesville is a city home to a growing immigrant and refugee population and language continues to be a barrier for partners effectively engaging with residents and with residents

being able to successfully navigate available resources. While the International Rescue Committee's local resettlement chapter hires interpreters, it seems that their model is too expensive and not currently structured to effectively meet the needs of many partners. Funding is a major barrier to accessing phone interpretation, but perhaps this or a collective system in which organizations and can jointly invest could address this need. Professionally translated written materials may have some limited use for static materials that do not expire quickly for families that can read. It was also suggested that the city should provide on-call interpreters for languages that are common in Charlottesville.

Several organizations initiated home delivery or delivery-based models during the pandemic that was imperative for safety and access reasons. More funding is needed for vehicles and staffing to continued versions of this approach. The team also observed that many people are offering food assistance in the same neighborhoods and that perhaps with additional coordination, groups could work more efficiently, be less confusing to participants and then would have more resources for transportation, staffing, or reaching more disparate communities of people.

Inadequate public transportation continues to be a major barrier for low-income families being able to get to services efficiently. Continuing to expand access to bus routes in the urban ring is needed.

## 6. Expand opportunities for best practice and resource sharing in the local food security space.

Throughout the focus group discussions, the review team observed numerous instances where organizations were able to share ideas, information, and strategies with one another in the context of the conversations. It seemed that while some organizations actively work and share with one another regularly, particularly key members of the Food Justice Network, that others could greatly benefit from more opportunity to learn and garner support from others. This pattern loosely followed those whose core missions revolve around food justice and food security, versus those who support some aspect of the work as part of a broader mission.

This effort need not be complicated, but could take the form of an annual local meeting, or as an expansion of the efforts of the Food Justice Network, who have continued to convene the organizations and agencies around food.

## 7. Continue to invest in long term resilience and food justice strategies.

Addressing the systemic barriers to health and wealth is critical to increasing community resilience and to reducing the overall vulnerability within our community. By having a more just and healthful food system overall, the community will be better prepared to weather emergencies like the COVID-19 pandemic caused.