



CHARLOTTESVILLE COVID-19 EMERGENCY FOOD RESPONSE

Lessons Learned Review

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

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Abbreviations and Glossary of Terms

List of Abbreviations

BRAFB	- Blue Ridge Area Food Bank
BRHD	- Blue Ridge Health District
CCC	- Charlottesville Community Cares
CCS	- Charlottesville City Schools
CSG	- City Schoolyard Garden, Cultivate Charlottesville
DHS	- Department of Human Services
EOC	- Emergency Operations Center
FJN	- Food Justice Network, Cultivate Charlottesville
FLF	- Frontline Foods



GPC	- Global Policy Center
HC	- The UVA Humanitarian Collaborative
L&F	- Loaves and Fishes Food Pantry
LFH	- Local Food Hub
MOW	- Meals on Wheels
PB&J Fund	- Peanut Butter and Jelly Fund
UAC	- Urban Agriculture Collective, Cultivate Charlottesville
UVA	- University of Virginia
WCK	- World Central Kitchen

Glossary

Community Representative – A trusted community leader who bridges communication and connection between organizations and community members in neighborhoods where services are provided. They may represent a group that has something in common or unique experiences or circumstances (like being connected to the Latinx community, or to seniors) or they may focus on a particular neighborhood. Different organizations in Charlottesville compensate and utilize community representative in different ways, sometimes referring to them as Community Collaborators, Community Navigators, or Community Connectors. These all might mean slightly different things to different organizations, however the idea of a community member that acts as a bridge between neighborhoods and organizations, agencies or mutual aid groups, is similar.

Equity – “Equity is defined as “the state, quality or ideal of being just, impartial and fair.” The concept of equity is synonymous with fairness and justice. It is helpful to think of equity as not simply a desired state of affairs or a lofty value. To be achieved and sustained, equity needs to be thought of as a structural and systemic concept.” (“Equity vs. Equality”, 2020) For the purposes of this report our use of the term equity references primarily to racial equity given the disproportionate impact that food insecurity and COVID-19 have had on Black and brown people.

Equity vs. Equality – “Equity involves trying to understand and give people what they need to enjoy full, healthy lives. Equality, in contrast, aims to ensure that everyone gets the same things in order to enjoy full, healthy lives. Like equity, equality aims to promote fairness and justice, but it can only work if everyone starts from the same place and needs the same things.” (“Equity vs. Equality”, 2020)

Food Justice – “Food justice is a holistic and structural view of the food system that sees healthy food as a human right and addresses structural barriers to that right. The movement draws in part on *environmental justice*, which emerged in the 1980s as a critique of how environmentalism became more mainstream as it became more elite, more white, and more focused on wilderness and scenery than on human communities vulnerable to pollution (the effects of which are at once disparate and racialized)”. (“Food Justice”, 2021) (Purdy, 2016)

Food Security – “The US Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines food security as “access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life.” (“Definitions...”, 2018) Low food security includes “reduced quality, variety, or desirability of diet[, with] little or no indication of reduced food intake,” while very low food security includes “multiple indications of disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake.” (“Food Security...”, 2018)” (“Hunger and Food...”, 2021)

Organizational Representative (also known as Service Provider) – Individuals from organizations, agencies or other groups that have organized to provide or support the emergency food security response in Charlottesville, including but not limited to supplies, people power, funding, coordination, logistics, transportation.

Program Participant – Someone who is receiving services or support from an organization, group, or agency.

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 (Hunter, 2020). 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 (Holt, 2014)

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

Strong Communities	
Partner with community stakeholders to define a vision for success.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ 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. ✓ Feedback from Crescent Halls residents informed the development of community testing and wrap around services program.



Develop a process that ensures alignment with the shared values and the shared vision of success (the outcome).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Partners developed a stakeholder steering committee that used the FJN equity framework to establish operating values, guidelines, and goals of a new, emergency food assistance program that emerged during the pandemic. ✓ 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.
Assign clear responsibility for adhering to shared values.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ 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.
Identify community needs and assets, as well as pre-existing vulnerability and resilience.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Invested in community representatives (financially and with capacity building) to act as liaisons and advocate between organizations and community members. ✓ Prioritized local businesses, especially Black and brown businesses, to prepare community meals. ✓ Acknowledged histories of discrimination when creating a robust communications plan and comprehensive wrap around model to support families affected by a COVID positive diagnosis.
Build methods of collecting direct feedback on services into organizational work plans.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Many organizations described ways that they solicit and use participant feedback through surveys, word of mouth or community navigators.
Empower communities to make decisions for their communities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ 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. ✓ Developed response plans with members of the neighborhood or housing community in focus.

Justice and Fairness

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



they can be protected from further harm.	since dropping from enrollment is often a barrier for government assistance programs.
Remove barriers to resource access, especially in emergency situations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Expanded access to information about available food resources through a free text messaging service. ✓ Reduced the amount of paperwork required to receive support. ✓ Relaxed requirements for in person food access- i.e., allowed proxy pick-ups for food, greatly expanding access to food. ✓ Community leaders used social media to share information about meal support outreach. ✓ 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. ✓ Food Bank provided supplemental support to direct food providers and support their efforts. ✓ Operations ramped up so that no one was waiting to receive meal delivery.
Monitor your service activities and hold your organization accountable to its goals.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Reviewed response outcomes and metrics with the steering committee regularly.
Provide community members with a safe system for airing grievances with service providers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Community representatives sometimes helped to air grievances on behalf of participants and buffered them from fear of retribution. ✓ Legal aid helped to support the rights and interests of children in public schools receiving meals.

Healthy People

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



Address socioeconomic and geographical barriers to services.	✓ See above.
Recognize that vulnerable communities need ongoing support.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Extended the duration of available support beyond the normal scope of service. ✓ 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.

Culture and Identity

Respect dietary restrictions, cultural diets, and dietary choices.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Used participant feedback to adjust meals being provided- such as Hallal, vegetarian, and other dietary restrictions. ✓ 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.
Provide accessible information about the services available to each community.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Community navigators helped their community members understand what resources were available, provided interpretations, answered questions, and built relationships with people to understand their needs. ✓ Many organizations provided written translation of materials (mostly Spanish), or provided pictorial communication aids. ✓ Some organizations provided interpreters for participants. (Spanish)
Recognize subjectivities- Power relations, cultural contexts, and neighborhood dynamics.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Community representatives served as systems navigators and advocated for non-English-speaking families who had a preference for culturally appropriate foods. ✓ Provided gift cards to the Charlottesville Latinx community regardless of immigration status through a partnership with Sin Barreras. ✓ 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.

Vibrant Farms

Utilize emergency response strategies that support local farms.	✓ Purchased locally sourced foods products for emergency food services.
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Thriving Local Economies

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

Emerging Strategies

Prioritize and maintain actions that build community trust.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Offered reliability and consistency. ✓ Learned community members names. ✓ Worked with community leaders to establish support.
Collaborate across groups to amplify efficacy, efficiency, and impact.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Established communication channels to support organizational needs and to share information with one another. ✓ PB&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. ✓ 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.
Build off of systems that are already familiar to people.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ 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.
Amplify pre-existing efforts when possible.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Find funding and support for existing mutual aid efforts instead of competing- such as FLF/WCK supporting Happy Saturdays.



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Work to fill gaps rather than competing or duplicating – such as providing meals to youth when the schools are closed.
Protect the safety of volunteers, staff and partners.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Shared and followed CDC and local guidelines such as utilizing protective masks and cleaning products to eliminate the spread of COVID. ✓ 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. ✓ Provided online and YouTube training to volunteers to minimize congregating. ✓ Shared PPE/cleaning supplies between organizations.

Challenges to an Effective and Equity-based Response

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

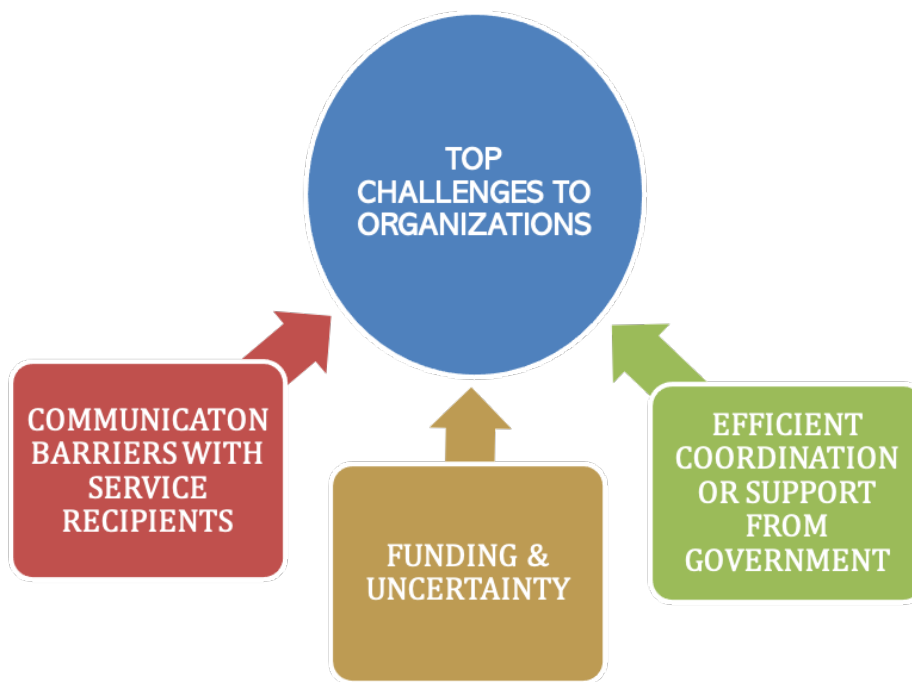
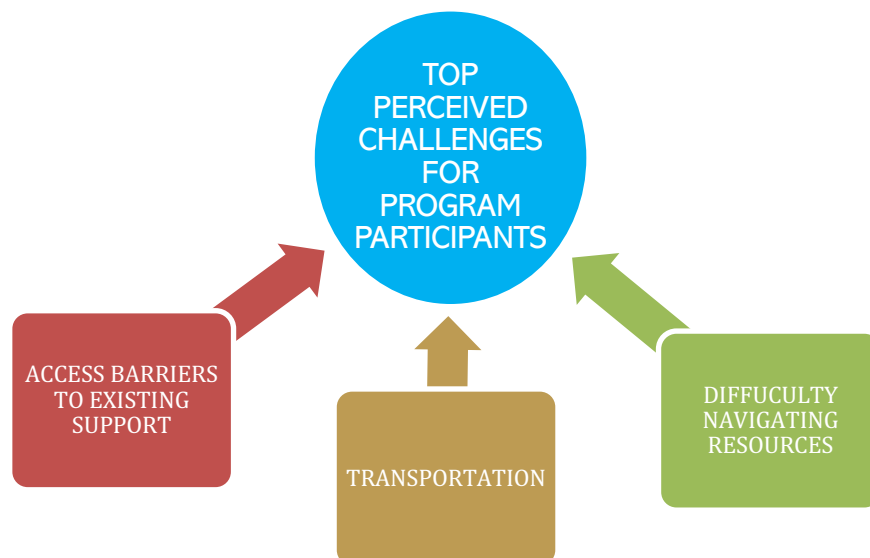


Figure 2: Top Perceived Challenges for Program Participants During COVID-19



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.

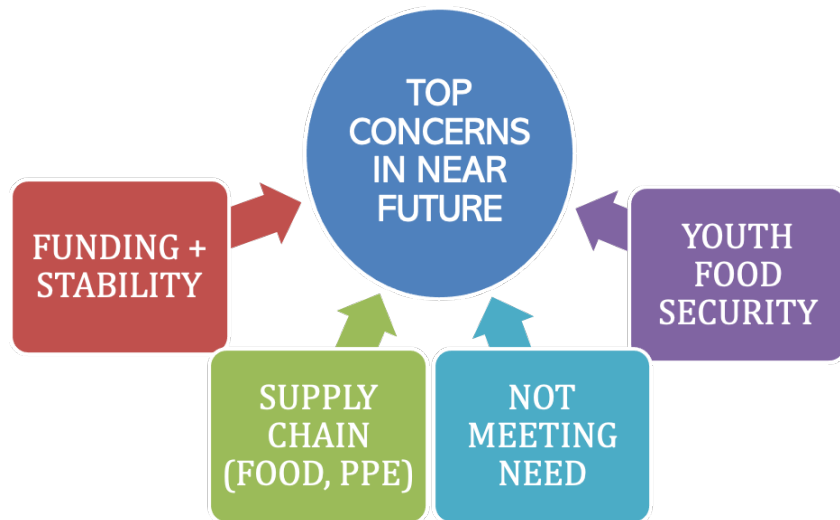
In any emergency, responders must prioritize their resources and serve the most vulnerable first. On the other hand, the organizations and groups supporting people experiencing food insecurity provide a vital service; if they are not operational, the community will find additional emergencies on their 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. (Aday, 2020) 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.

Introduction

Why Do We Need Equity-based Response Strategies?

On March 30th, 2020, the Governor of Virginia issued an “Order for Shelter in Place” until June 10th, 2020 to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, the illness also known as the novel coronavirus. This order included the closure of all non-essential businesses and schools and limited both public and private gatherings. Emergency food assistance services were permitted to remain open, but to do so required major adaptations to business operations. In Charlottesville, the pandemic and the Governor’s order required these organizations and community members to adapt and even reinvent their operations to meet the food security needs of the community, all with no warning. Over the following months, organizations and individuals continued to develop new partnerships and practices to adapt to the circumstances and to meet increased demand for emergency food assistance.

Food insecurity has been an ongoing problem in Charlottesville even prior to the pandemic where one in six residents in the City of Charlottesville faces food insecurity (“Map the Meal Gap,” 2020). This represents roughly 7,600 residents that struggle with food insecurity daily. In Charlottesville City Schools (CCS), more than 57% of the student population is eligible to receive Free & Reduced Meals, which equates to roughly 2470 students. When disaggregated by neighborhood, this number is as high as 85%. (Bingham, 2018). Food insecurity has disproportionately affected communities of color in and other low-wealth communities. Black Virginians experience obesity rates of 39.2%, nearly 1.5 times greater than their White counterparts (25.7%)(Segal et al, 2014). And Black residents in Charlottesville are 4 times more likely to die of diabetes than White residents (“CDC Health Profile,” 2019).

Additionally, as COVID-19 cases continue to spread, the data shows that groups previously experiencing discrimination have also been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. For example, at the time of this report, data from the Virginia Health Department reports that since the onset of the pandemic, Black individuals in the Blue Ridge Health District make up 31.2% of hospitalizations due to COVID-19 and 19.6% of fatalities (“COVID-19 BRHD,” 2020). However,

Black individuals only represent up 14.1 % of the population in those five counties and the City of Charlottesville. In Charlottesville, Black people make up 19.4% of the population while Hispanic/Latinos make up 5.8%. Black people constitute 13.9% of active cases, 33.8% of COVID-19 hospitalizations, and 24% of COVID-19 fatalities. Hispanic/Latinos constitute 17.7% of active cases and make up 15.7% of hospitalizations. (“United States Census,” 2020) These disparate rates have impacted the food security of communities of color (Holt-G., 2011).

The pandemic has compounded the previous effects of food insecurity on the Charlottesville population, exacerbating gaps that already existed. This is why a focus on developing equity-based response and recovery solutions is needed to prevent these widening of the gaps, and possibly, to take advantage of opportunities to close them.

Purpose

The review captures the lessons learned and best practices in equity-based response strategies used and/or developed during the early and mid-term phases of the pandemic in the Charlottesville area with regard to community food security, from roughly March through early fall 2020. The report examines operational and system-wide responses from the Charlottesville Food Justice Network member and partner organizations and community leaders with a focus on building racial equity into the framework of our 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 equity-based 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 (Hunter, 2020). 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 (Holt, 2014)

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.

Scope

This is not a formal evaluation, nor does the review team consist of professional evaluators. Rather, this review synthesized stakeholders input in order inform. The report also primarily focused on partners of Cultivate Charlottesville Food Justice Network efforts. There are additional groups, organizations, or individuals supporting food security in the Charlottesville area who did not participate in this review. The review omitted a detailed focus of the COVID-19 Wraparound Support Program and partners because there were so many involved and this program underwent a detailed evaluation process that was conducted by The Equity Center at UVA. That report can be found on the Equity Center's website.

The city of Charlottesville was the primary geographical focus on the review, although organizations who participated in the review serve surrounding counties. Additionally, the team solicited feedback primarily via organizational representatives as opposed to gathering feedback from service recipients themselves. They did, however gather feedback from community representatives who live or work closely in the neighborhoods where services are being provided, and who have been designated to speak up for and on behalf of community residents. Their input added insight and accountability to the conversation but is not meant to replace a direct evaluation of service recipients. That effort is beyond the scope of this review.

Intended Audience

This report is intended as a tool for Cultivate Charlottesville Food Justice Network staff and partners as well as local governmental decisionmakers to inform future response and recovery practices so they may best meet the needs of those most affected by food insecurity during the pandemic and beyond. It may also be useful as a reference tool for members outside of the immediate community who wish to conduct their own lessons learned review, or who wish to identify equity-based response strategies to be used in their own community or organization.

Limitations and Challenges

Review Team

The review team lead included a member of the FJN planning team, and was also directly involved in the food security response. This may impart some degree of subjectivity to the review recommendations and response. The report was reviewed by members of the advisory committee prior to completion.

Stakeholder Participation

This review focused on active partners with the Food Justice Network during the Covid-19 food emergency food security response and recovery in Charlottesville. While as many actors as possible were included in the review, some groups were not available to participate or may be unknown.

Review Budget and Resources

The UVA Humanitarian Collaborative provided in kind support to this review via staff time, as well as financial support for student research assistant time. Cultivate Charlottesville provided incentives funding for community representative focus group and survey participants. This project budget did not allow for the administration of a representative community survey, meaning the data collected is not statistically relevant, nor is it treated as such.

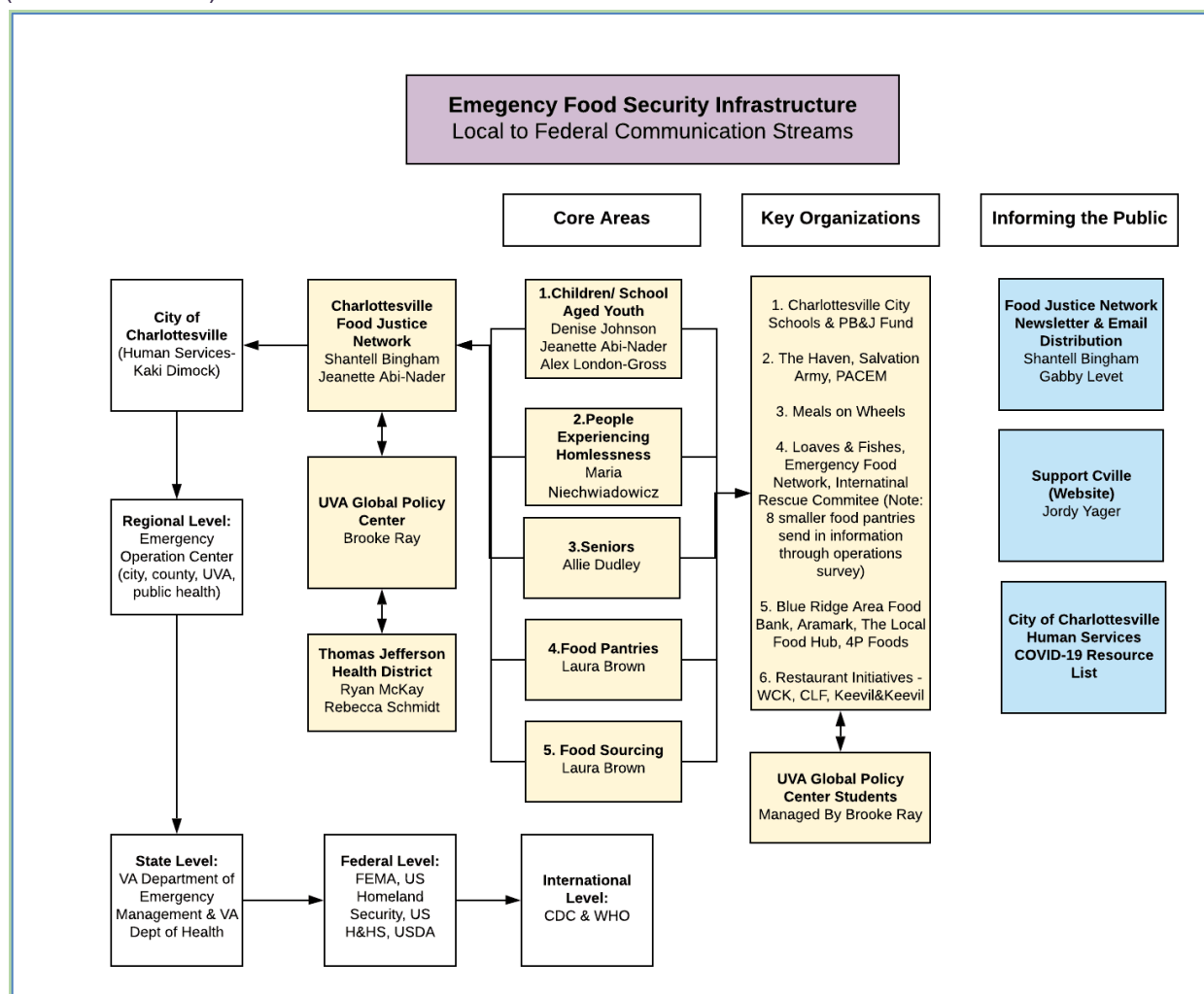
Background

Many actors, existing and new, public and private, stepped into the food security space in Charlottesville during the pandemic. One of the existing groups was the Food Justice Network. The FJN is a program of Cultivate Charlottesville, an independent 501(c)3 organization, and is composed of more than thirty organizational members from non-profits, city departments, and local agencies. Since March, the FJN stepped in to support coordination, communication and resource linkages between organizations and government bodies. With many partners the FJN continued to develop localized tools, practices, and systems to help ensure an equity-based response and recovery. The FJN was well-positioned to take on the multi-sectoral coordination of

emergency food security response due to its broad ranging pre-existing partnerships with community members, services providers and local government.

The chart below represents the role that many of the actors involved in this review played in providing critical information with one another and local government. The FJN helped to facilitated communications between partners and to facilitate new response collaborations amongst them. FJN also prepared reports (including the chart below) for the Charlottesville Department of Human Services (DHS).

Figure 4: Emergency Food Security Infrastructure- Local to Federal Communications Streams (as of 4/27/2020)



Review Methods

Equity-based Strategies and Review Framework

One central aspect of review consisted of identifying what equitable responses were used locally. To create a starting point the review team researched some suggested practices from communities and justice and equity-focused resources. These practices were seated with the Food Justice Network's Equity Framework, creating a menu of options for participants to use as a starting point for discussion. The Equity Framework was used because it was previously developed with significant community input and has been used to ground partner practices in Charlottesville. The original Equity-based Response Strategies are presented in Appendix I.

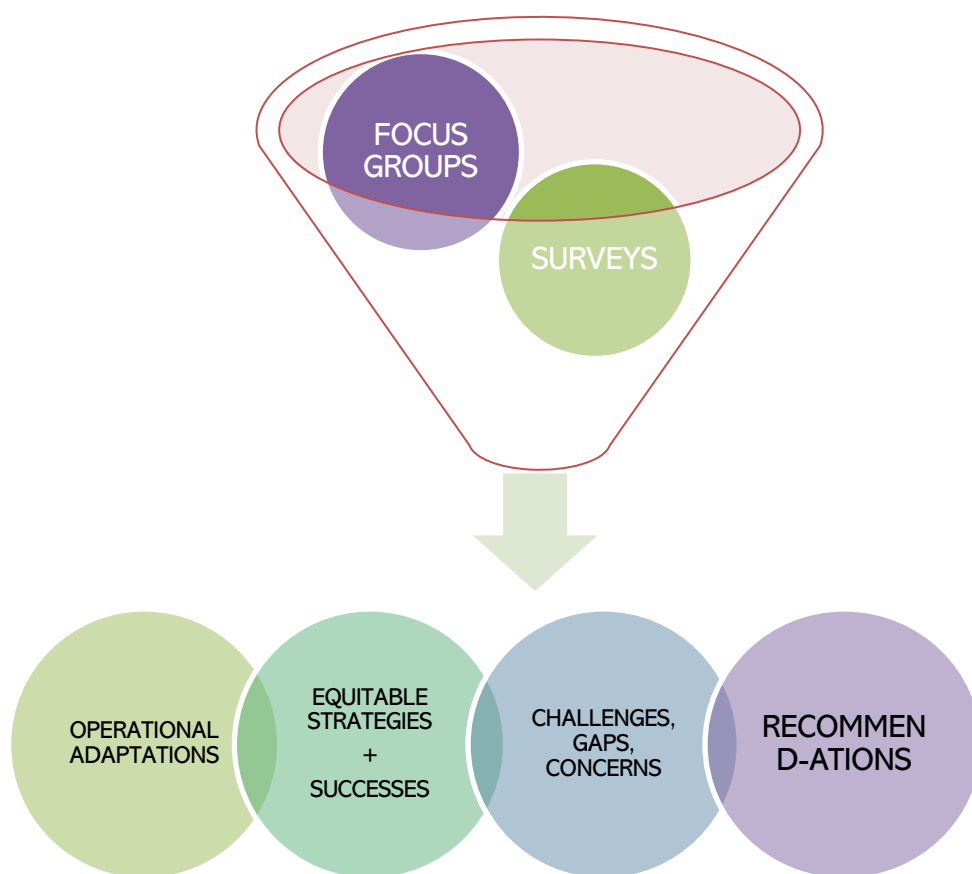
Figure 5: Equity Framework - Charlottesville Food Justice Network



Review Structure

The team consulted with the advisory committee to develop the review goals and strategy. The review team and advisory committee decided that the review would be made up of community input with more than one avenue for engagement to enable people to contribute in whichever format was most convenient and comfortable for them. For this reason, we 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.

Figure 6: Lessons Learned Review Structure



Focus Groups

The review team facilitated four 90-minute focus groups consisting of organizational, public school, mutual aid support group representatives, and community representatives. The focus groups invitees were identified by the advisory committee. Each group was loosely organized by the type of service they were providing to the community (such as meal distribution), or by the group of people they were serving (such as school-aged youth). This served the purpose of

making the conversations more focused and efficient. We also made an effort to have one or more community representatives – someone deeply rooted in the community of interest – present at each of the meetings. We felt this was a way to add more diverse viewpoints, accountability and perspective to the conversation. It was also a way to bring in community voice since we were not conducting a community wide survey as part of the review. Community representatives received a \$50 gift card to participate in the focus group, while organizational representatives were requested to participate as part of their employment.

Focus Group Questions

The following questions provided a guide to the conversations that the team led with each of the three focus groups. Due to time limitations, not every group responded to every question. The focus groups were conducted over Zoom:

1. Looking at the Equity-based Response Strategies Checklist, which of these strategies has your organization actively used? [See the initial equity-based response strategies table in Appendix I]
2. Let's discuss some of the examples from your work. Was community trust and relationship already established before the pandemic? In what way? How did you prioritize those most affected by food insecurity and the pandemic? How did you incorporate community input into your processes and/or decision-making? Community Advocates - what are your thoughts? Which of these strategies do you think should be prioritized? Were these strategies apparent from your point of view.
3. Are there strategies on this list that are missing? If so, what are they? Do you have examples of how you employed them?
4. How have your organizations and communities balanced working towards long-term food equity and justice while also focusing on emergency response? What long-term food justice goals does this group have that can be supported alongside emergency response? Community representatives, what suggestions do you have?
5. What are your biggest concerns about community food security right now?
6. Which partners, organizations or government agencies were most helpful to your organization in being able to remain open and to adapt and coordinate services? Select all that apply and add if needed.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blue Ridge Area Food Bank • Bread and Roses • Charlottesville City Schools • Cultivate Charlottesville • Charlottesville Cares • Department of Human Services • Emergency Operations Center 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local Food Hub • Meals on Wheels • PACEM • PB&J Fund • Public Housing Advisory Board • Public Association of Residents • Refugee/SIV
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frontline Foods/World Central Kitchen • International Neighbors • International Rescue Committee • Keevil and Keevil Chris Long Foundation • Pearl Island • Loaves and Fishes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Salvation Army • The Haven • Thomas Jefferson Health District (Blue Ridge Health District) • UAC • UVA Equity Center • UVA Global Policy Center • OTHER_____
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7. If Charlottesville suffered another (long-term) crisis, what gaps remain for this group in being able to successfully support the emergency food security needs of the community? What support was needed, or what improvements would you suggest for the future?
8. To what extent do you agree with the following statement? If a similar emergency situation like the pandemic requires rapid shelter in place, our organization could continue operations without interruption.
 - ☐ 1 - highly disagree
 - ☐ 2 - Slightly disagree
 - ☐ 3- neither disagree nor agree
 - ☐ 4 - slightly agree
 - ☐ 5- highly agree
12. What would your organization need to prepare for a similar emergency? Community representatives, what do you see as the most important things that would keep food security support accessible to your community?

Focus Group Response Analysis

The focus groups were then transcribed and responses were sorted into one of four categories:

1. Response Adaptations Summary
2. Equity-based Strategies and Successes
3. Challenges, Gaps and Concerns
4. Recommendations

Under each topic, these responses were sorted by prevalence and then summarized.

Surveys

The team developed and conducted two surveys to gather additional input from stakeholders. One survey was developed for organizational representatives and one for service providers. The survey was provided to allow more people that who attended the focus groups to participate in the review, and to offer a more private format for providing feedback. Community representatives who completed the survey were offered a \$20 Visa gift card, care of Cultivate Charlottesville.

Organizational representatives were asked to participate as part of their employment. Surveys were distributed via email and made available online only. It was determined that most community representative either had access to a phone or computer and internet to be able to complete the survey digitally. We also gave people the option to contact us to receive a paper survey.

Service Provider (Organizational Representative) Survey Questions

To what extent do you agree with the following statements for your organization?

Response Options:

- ☐ Strongly agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ neither/nor
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly disagree
- ☐ I don't know

1. Our organization has developed a vision for pandemic resiliency in collaboration with community stakeholders.

Please describe:

2. Our organization prioritizes assistance to communities that are most affected by food insecurity.

Which groups of people do you prioritize?

If you do, how do you ensure that those who need assistance the most are prioritized?

3. The types of food we provide are nutritious.

Please describe:

4. The types of food being provided are desired by those who most need it. Comment:

5. People have a safe system for airing grievances with our organization.

Please explain:

6. The people who need our food assistance most know where and how to access our resources.

How do you conduct outreach?

What has been most successful during the pandemic?

7. Communities are included in the decision making about what and how food services are offered.

How do you accomplish this?

What are the challenges?

8. Emergency response strategies we have developed support local and minority-owned businesses.

Comment:

9. Emergency response strategies we have developed support local farms.

Comment:

10. How has your organization balanced working towards long-term food equity and justice while also focusing on emergency response?

Comment:

11. Did your organization lose any of the following resources? Check all that apply.

- ☐ Funding
- ☐ Transportation
- ☐ Staff members
- ☐ Supplies
- ☐ Location (central office/working space for volunteers)
- ☐ Storage
- ☐ Donations
- ☐ Food
- ☐ Other _____

12. Does your organization have the necessary resources to continue its services going forward into the winter and spring?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ I don't know

13. What are your organization's biggest concerns going into the winter?

Comment:

14. Which partners, organizations or government agencies were most helpful to your organization in being able to remain open and to adapt and coordinate services? Select all that apply and add if needed.

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Charlottesville City Schools• Cultivate Charlottesville• PB&J Fund• Blue Ridge Area Food Bank• International Rescue Committee• Refugee/SIV• Loaves and Fishes• Frontline Foods/World Central Kitchen• Meals on Wheels• Public housing advisory board• Emergency operations center• TJHD	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• PHAR• UVA Equity Center• C'ville Cares• Salvation Army• Department of Human Services• Local Food Hub• UAC• The Haven• International Neighbors• Keevil and Keevil• Chris Long Foundation• Bread and Roses• Other (please specify)
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(continued from Q14): What assistance has been most helpful?
What gaps in assistance remain?



Community Representative Survey Questions

1. On a scale 1-5, how well do you think the emergency food security needs of your neighborhood/community currently being met?
☐ 0 - not at all
☐ 1
☐ 2
☐ 3
☐ 4
☐ 5 - needs are met
2. What food assistance services do you think your community/neighborhood you represent used during the pandemic? Select all organizations that apply.
☐ SNAP/EBT
☐ WIC
☐ School meals delivery
☐ Loaves and Fishes Grocery Deliveries
☐ Going to food pantries
☐ Local Food Hub Fresh Farmacy delivery - local produce bags
☐ Frontline Foods prepared meals
☐ UAC farm stand
☐ PB&J Fund grocery bag deliveries
☐ Food Not Bombs
☐ Other (please add) _____
3. In your opinion, what types of food assistance have been most helpful to your community/neighborhood?
Comment:

To what extent do you agree with the following statements about the organizations that are providing food resources to your community or neighborhood? *Please include and further comment or examples in the space provided.*

Response Options:

- ☐ Strongly agree
 - ☐ Agree
 - ☐ neither/nor
 - ☐ Disagree
 - ☐ Strongly disagree
 - ☐ I don't know
4. My community/neighborhood was included in developing a vision for recovery from the pandemic. *Comment:*
 5. My community is receiving the food assistance it needs.
Comment:
 6. The types of food being provided are nutritious.

Comment:

7. The types of food being provided are desired by those who most need it.

Comment:

8. My community/neighborhood has a safe way to report grievances with the organizations providing food assistance.

Comment:

9. The people in my community/neighborhood know what food assistance is available and how to access it.

What works?

What needs improvement?

10. The organizations providing food assistance include my community/neighborhood in the decision making about how they operate.

Are there examples of what has worked best?

11. The organizations providing food assistance in my community/neighborhood support local and/or minority owned businesses

Comment:

12. The organizations providing food assistance in my community/neighborhood support local farms.

Comment:

13. What suggestions do you have for how organizations can better work with your neighborhood or community?

Comment:

14. What neighborhood(s) or community groups do you represent? (optional) _____

Methodology Considerations

There are limitations to this approach. Even though the community representatives present in our focus groups were known community leaders who hold this role officially or unofficially with organizations, there may still be a hesitancy to speak candidly. This approach also does not replace a representative survey that would give more accurate feedback on services provided. Paying community representatives for their time can also skew the type of input we might receive. However, we adhere to the principal that community members should be compensated fairly for their time, just as organizational representatives are paid. We view this as an important equity practice. Only offering the survey digitally was a limitation of resources, but may have contributed to a relatively small number of responses.

Results and Findings

Nineteen (19) service providers and community representatives attended the focus groups, representing sixteen (16) organizations or groups. The survey for service providers received fourteen (14) responses. The community representative's survey received thirteen (13) responses.

Organizational Response Adaptations

Below is a brief overview, as reported by focus group participants, of some of the adaptations and new activities that service providers used to meet the food the emergency food needs of in Charlottesville. While this is not a complete overview of what every organization has executed throughout the pandemic the list includes key highlights that focus group attendees identified as most relevant.

Abundant Life

When the pandemic hit Charlottesville, Abundant Life set up outdoor tables in the Prospect St. neighborhood near their office and handed out food to residents there. Occasionally, volunteers delivered food directly to area residents in need who were unable to access pickup locations. Abundant life had existing relationships with community members that enabled them to reach people.

Blue Ridge Area Food Bank (BRAFB)

BRAFB partners with area food pantries, both church-based and independent nonprofits. During the pandemic they supported other agencies to stay open, particularly with the FJN and the Salvation Army through providing pre-packed food boxes. They assisted with the wraparound services model organized by the FJN, through the aforementioned food boxes, and supplied food boxes at Church of the Incarnation's weekly testing events.

Boys & Girls Clubs of Central Virginia

The Boys & Girls Club provided prepared meals to the families of youth enrolled in their program during the course of the pandemic. They initially worked with the Chris Long Foundation and later with Charlottesville Community Cares and their partnership with World Central Kitchen/Frontline Foods. Additionally, Boys & Girls Club has an outdoor food pantry box at their Cherry Avenue club for families to access freely as needed; this resource has been readily used.

Charlottesville City Schools

Since March 2020, the CCS has delivered prepared meals to students using the existing school bus routes and at a number of different local community locations using school staff and volunteers. The meals are provided only when school is scheduled, so this resource didn't include weekends or holidays.

Charlottesville Community Cares

CCC is a mutual aid group that was formed during the onset of the pandemic. The volunteers worked with the goal of alleviating some of the economic and health hardships that arose when the pandemic hit, focusing primarily on food relief work. This included raising money for grocery purchases and delivery to individuals needing assistance or to shelter-in-place. In the beginning they provided grocery shopping and delivery, as well as medication pick-up and delivery to those who couldn't or didn't want to go out. Eventually, the money from the initial donations ran out at which point CCC collaborated with World Central Kitchen and Frontline Foods. In collaboration with World Central Kitchen and Frontline Foods, Charlottesville Community Cares purchased prepared meals from local businesses and distributed them to low-income neighborhoods.

Cultivate Charlottesville - City Schoolyard Garden, Urban Agriculture Collective, and Food Justice Network

Food Distribution

Since March 2020, Cultivate Charlottesville provided prepared meals to Charlottesville City school students on days that the school district was not open. They worked with Charlottesville Community Cares and World Central Kitchen/Frontline Foods as well as other community partners on Memorial Day, Spring Break, and Labor Day to cover roughly two thousand meals each day. UAC also continued to conduct outreach and food assistance to neighborhoods downtown, and to provide surplus produce to partners involved in food distribution.

Cross-agency Communications/Coordination and Leadership

Early on in the shutdown, FJN focused on communications with partners and helped to ensure their network members had the resources (volunteers, PPE, food supplies, funds) they needed. FJN worked with the Global Policy Center at UVA to conduct check-ins with organizational partners and to provide reporting back to the Charlottesville Department of Human Services. As the pandemic progressed, FJN shifted into direct COVID response coordination and assistance – helping to develop and support the Wrap-around Service Model with numerous partners, sending out weekly food resource calendars, and eventually spearheading a food resource text messaging service that extended into surrounding counties in the Blue Ridge Health District. Finally, FJN worked with Frontline Foods/World Central Kitchen to develop their local steering committee. The committee guided this new organization with funding and ties from outside the community on the most strategic and equitable ways to go distributing prepared meals locally.

Wrap-around Service Model

FJN helped design and implement the COVID-19 Wrap-around Services model in low-income areas in Charlottesville. With numerous community stakeholders and partners, this model conducted COVID-19 testing in low-income neighborhoods and neighborhoods predominantly occupied by residents of color. At community testing events hosted by Sentara Martha Jefferson Hospital, individuals testing positive for COVID-19 were also screened for other needs such as food, prescription medication, and financial support to enable them to successfully quarantine. Over its duration, the Wrap-around program reached **213 cases, 906 individuals total**, including **557 adults** and **349 children**. Support, depending on the needs of each case included prepared meals, shelf-stable food and produce, PPE and sanitation supplies, access to medication, financial support and hotel assistance.

Global Policy Center

The Global Policy Center partners UVA faculty, staff and students with community and practitioners to help solve pressing humanitarian problems around the world. The GPC operates the UVA Humanitarian Collaborative which supported the local food security response with expert advisory support, staff time and funding. They worked with the FJN and EOC to provide regular situational reporting on community food security needs during COVID-19.

Happy Saturdays

Happy Saturdays was started by Nick Feggans and others who know that kids in their neighborhood needed meals during the pandemic. Feggans works with the Boys & Girls Club and is well connected in the Cherry Avenue area and surrounding neighborhoods. The Happy Saturday's team purchased happy meals from McDonald's at their own personal expense early on in the pandemic and later partnered with Charlottesville Community Cares and Cultivate to merge their knowledge and extensive community contacts with additional funding and to purchase locally, offering more nutritious options.

Local Food Hub

Local Food Hub is a nonprofit that supports farmers in the region and also works on food access issues in the community. LFH has long run a produce prescription program called Fresh Farmacy that uses food from local partner farms to provide patients at low-income health clinics in the Charlottesville area with fresh food. LFH reconfigured that program during the pandemic to provide groceries bags to 600-650 homes per week - more than double the number prior to the pandemic, and to provide home delivery instead of clinic pickups.

The reimagined program had two goals: to provide an outlet for partner farms who lost their traditional market outlets overnight when universities, restaurants, and retailers closed; and also, to provide access, education, and knowledge about consuming fresh fruits and vegetables. In addition to the produce and eggs included in each bag, LFH also included bilingual educational materials (English and Spanish) with deliveries including cooking and storage tips and recipes. LFH is also operated drive-through farmer's markets twice a week to help farmers stay in business.

Loaves and Fishes

Loaves and Fishes is a local food pantry located in Albemarle County. Since the pandemic L&F has converted their food distribution from what is called "client choice" where people walk through and choose their foods to pre-packing a minimum of 100 pounds of food per household for pickup. They serve 100 plus households and distribute 3 days a week under pandemic conditions. They hired several staff to support this model as many volunteers were not able to participate for safety reasons.

PB&J Fund

PB&J Fund normally teaches cooking classes for children and families with a focus on working with under-resourced community members. When the pandemic and shutdown began in March 2020 PB&J shifted to emergency food distribution for families they work with by packing bags of shelf-stable food with some additional fresh produce. They initially were distributing bags at various locations from trucks to public housing and other low-income neighborhoods across the city, and later moved to a monthly distribution using contactless home delivery.

Meals on Wheels Charlottesville-Albemarle

MOW serves people of any age that meet their criteria of being homebound, unable to cook for themselves, unable to work outside the home, and unable to drive. When the pandemic occurred, Meals on Wheels adjusted their services to reach more people. They eliminated their waitlist, serving 260 people every Monday through Friday throughout the city and county. Early on in the pandemic, MOW had to move from daily deliveries to every-other-week deliveries of reheat foods and select groceries instead of their typical hot meals. They later moved back to more normal operations but with a new commitment to continue to serve more people overall in the long term.

New Beginnings Christian Church

New Beginnings Christian Community offers a food pantry from their church on East Market Street, offering food supplies to those without access to U.S. Department USDA foods. Prior to the pandemic, New Beginnings gets foods from grocery store leftovers and has very few participation requirements as compared to food pantries that are supplied by the United States Department of Agriculture. With the help of a volunteer, they also began distributing some leftover foods directly to Crescent Halls and Midway Manor, two affordable and subsidized housing complexes.

Universalist Unitarian Church of Charlottesville

The Unitarian Church has operated a food pantry for 15 years for people eligible for USDA food on a first come first served basis. During the pandemic they also partnered with New Beginnings church food pantry to share some leftover foods. They moved to a drive-through distribution model during the pandemic in which people are handed pre-packed groceries directly to their cars. Distributions happen once a month.

Equity-Based Response Strategies

The **bolded** areas in the table below illustrate the strategies that organizations reported using during their COVID-19 response in the community.

Table 2: Equity-Based Response Strategies Used

Strong Communities
1. Employ the FJN Framework to establish a diverse, collaborative relationship, trust, and reciprocity.
2. Develop a collaborative values framework that all emergency response partner organizations sign off on.
3. Partner with community stakeholders to define a vision for success.
4. Develop a process that ensures alignment with the shared values and the shared vision of success (the outcome). For example, this could take the form of a collaborative values framework that all emergency response partner organizations sign off on.
5. Assign clear responsibility for adhering to shared values.
6. Identify community needs and assets, as well as pre-existing vulnerability and resilience.



7. Transparency and consistency in organizational practices and decision making.
8. Build methods of collecting direct feedback on services into organizational work plans.
9. Empower communities to make decisions for their communities.
Justice and Fairness
10. Prioritize support to communities most at risk or most vulnerable.
11. “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.
12. Remove barriers to resource access, especially in emergency situations. (Examples include lengthy applications processes, language, invasive data collection, etc.)
13. Monitor your service activities and hold your organization accountable to its goals.
14. Include input from recipients of your organization’s assistance in decision making on processes.
15. Community members have a safe system for airing grievances with service providers.
16. Perform a retroactive measure of the social vulnerability levels of communities before COVID-19 to see what groups stand to be the most vulnerable.
Healthy People
17. Ensure food assistance provided is nutritious and healthful.
18. Ensure a household’s lack of transportation does not hinder access to services/nutrition.
19. Address socioeconomic and geographical barriers to services.
20. Recognize that vulnerable communities need more support for longer periods of time.
Culture and Identity
21. Respect dietary restrictions, cultural diets, and dietary choices (vegetarianism, veganism.)
22. Provide accessible information about the services available to their community.
23. Recognize subjectivities: Power relations, cultural contexts, and neighborhood dynamics.
Vibrant Farms
24. Utilize emergency response strategies support local farms.
25. Include the rights and needs of farm workers and essential food workers.
26. Include local farmers and farm workers in decision making and communication.
27. Response strategies support minority owned farms.
Thriving Local Economies
28. Develop emergency response strategies that support the local economy.



29. Develop emergency response strategies that support minority-owned businesses.
30. Track and report on the investments.
Locally Emerging Strategies- The following strategies emerged from the focus group discussions:
31. Prioritize and Maintain actions that build community trust.
32. Collaborate across groups to amplify efficacy, efficiency, and impact.
33. Build off of systems that are already familiar to people.
34. Amplify pre-existing efforts when possible.
35. Protect the safety of volunteers, staff and partners.

Table 1: Examples of Equity-Based Response Strategies being employed in Charlottesville

Strong Communities	
Partner with community stakeholders to define a vision for success.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ 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. ✓ Feedback from Crescent Halls residents informed the development of community testing and wrap around services program.
Develop a process that ensures alignment with the shared values and the shared vision of success (the outcome).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Partners developed a stakeholder steering committee that used the FJN equity framework to establish operating values, guidelines, and goals of a new, emergency food assistance program that emerged during the pandemic. ✓ 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.
Assign clear responsibility for adhering to shared values.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ 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.
Identify community needs and assets, as well as pre-existing vulnerability and resilience.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Invested in community representatives (financially and with capacity building) to act as liaisons and advocate between organizations and community members. ✓ Prioritized local businesses, especially Black and brown businesses, to prepare community meals. ✓ Acknowledged histories of discrimination when creating a robust communications plan and comprehensive wrap

	around model to support families affected by a COVID positive diagnosis.
Build methods of collecting direct feedback on services into organizational work plans.	✓ Many organizations described ways that they solicit and use participant feedback through surveys, word of mouth or community navigators.
Empower communities to make decisions for their communities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ 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. ✓ Developed response plans with members of the neighborhood or housing community in focus.

Justice and Fairness

Prioritize support to communities most at risk or most vulnerable.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Partners were primarily already serving those most at risk. ✓ One organization shifted resources from providing food to healthcare workers to provide food to neighborhoods with a high prevalence of food insecurity.
“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"> ✓ Prioritized work with Black and brown businesses. ✓ Focused on offering meal support to communities of color. ✓ 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.
Remove barriers to resource access, especially in emergency situations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Expanded access to information about available food resources through a free text messaging service. ✓ Reduced the amount of paperwork required to receive support. ✓ Relaxed requirements for in person food access- i.e., allowed proxy pick-ups for food, greatly expanding access to food. ✓ Community leaders used social media to share information about meal support outreach. ✓ 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. ✓ Food Bank provided supplemental support to direct food providers and support their efforts.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Operations ramped up so that no one was waiting to receive meal delivery.
Monitor your service activities and hold your organization accountable to its goals.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Reviewed response outcomes and metrics with the steering committee regularly.
Provide community members with a safe system for airing grievances with service providers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Community representatives sometimes helped to air grievances on behalf of participants and buffered them from fear of retribution. ✓ Legal aid helped to support the rights and interests of children in public schools receiving meals.

Healthy People

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

Culture and Identity

Respect dietary restrictions, cultural diets, and dietary choices.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Used participant feedback to adjust meals being provided- such as Hallal, vegetarian, and other dietary restrictions. ✓ 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.
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Provide accessible information about the services available to each community.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Community navigators helped their community members understand what resources were available, provided interpretations, answered questions, and built relationships with people to understand their needs. ✓ Many organizations provided written translation of materials (mostly Spanish), or provided pictorial communication aids. ✓ Some organizations provided interpreters for participants. (Spanish)
Recognize subjectivities-Power relations, cultural contexts, and neighborhood dynamics.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Community representatives served as systems navigators and advocated for non-English-speaking families who had a preference for culturally appropriate foods. ✓ Provided gift cards to the Charlottesville Latinx community regardless of immigration status through a partnership with Sin Barreras. ✓ 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.

Vibrant Farms

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

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

Emerging Strategies

Prioritize and maintain actions that build community trust.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Offered reliability and consistency. ✓ Learned community members names. ✓ Worked with community leaders to establish support.
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Collaborate across groups to amplify efficacy, efficiency, and impact.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Established communication channels to support organizational needs and to share information with one another. ✓ PB&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. ✓ 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.
Build off of systems that are already familiar to people.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ 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.
Amplify pre-existing efforts when possible.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Find funding and support for existing mutual aid efforts instead of competing- such as FLF/WCK supporting Happy Saturdays. ✓ Work to fill gaps rather than competing or duplicating – such as providing meals to youth when the schools are closed.
Protect the safety of volunteers, staff and partners.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Shared and followed CDC and local guidelines such as utilizing protective masks and cleaning products to eliminate the spread of COVID. ✓ 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. ✓ Provided online and YouTube training to volunteers to minimize congregating. ✓ Shared PPE/cleaning supplies between organizations.



Further observations on Equity-Based Response Strategies and What has Worked in Charlottesville

Below includes more detail about the equity-based response strategies discussed in the focus groups and surveys. Some of this information overlaps with challenges, but will be summarized in that section.

Resiliency Vision

Based on survey feedback and focus group conversations, there is inconsistency across organizations about what community resilience looks like and the extent to which individual organizations have created a vision within a racial equity framework or in collaboration with communities most impacted by food insecurity. This work did take place more collectively, however, when organizations developed the racial equity framework with the FJN and when the mutual aid group Charlottesville Community Cares developed their own racial equity framework to guide their actions.

Prioritizing Assistance

Organizations have prioritized assistance for those most impacted by food insecurity and those most affected by COVID-19 and there is a clear understanding in this community of the connection between social determinants of health and wealth. One area for further development is with developing increased relationships with farm workers and Black and brown farmers. Some organizations use screening questions to prioritize or target their assistance by working in certain neighborhoods. One limitation of the geographical approach is that isolated individuals, such as those that do not live in low-income housing, may go unnoticed.

Quality of food provided

Many organizations report that providing healthy and desirable foods are a focal point of their work, while others continue to list this as a challenge and area that they hope to improve upon. Across the board, organizational representatives are aware that their constituents desire access to more fresh foods. There is also a collective focus on meeting the dietary restrictions of Charlottesville's growing immigrant population, including Latinx members and middle eastern families, who have a range of dietary preferences or restrictions. Language barriers are key hurdles in developing solutions, especially during COVID operations when most food is coming pre-pre-packed in bags. There is an opportunity for more established organizations to mentor smaller ones, and to collaborate even more systematically to enable more consistency in the quality of the food available in the emergency food security space.

School-aged youth are a particular concern

There is ongoing and increased desire for the city schools to increase the feedback channels for students about off-site meals deliveries. There is also an overwhelming desire for CCS to take a leading role in providing meals to students when school is not in session, particularly in the

summer months and beyond the pandemic. There is funding available and there are ready partners for this project. Additionally, concerns were raised among people working with and familiar with children's home life and a lack of access to food between 2pm and when school starts the following morning. One community representative noted that families may receive groceries, but that children still go hungry without the ability to cook and without an adult available to prepare a meal for them.

Safe methods for airing grievances

While focus groups revealed that some groups do have systems in place for feedback on preferences, it is unclear whether they have safe and transparent systems for airing grievances in place and that community members actually know about. One community representative cited this as lacking. Further the survey responses indicate that this may be a place for growth within organizations.

Challenges, Gaps and Concerns

Challenges to an Effective and Equity-Based Response

The pandemic precipitated a deluge of new challenges for service providers. In the beginning, organizations tackled these challenges by employing various strategies that were already identified as an equity-based response. In addition, the pandemic gave many organizations insight into the broader challenges faced by the communities they serve. A number of organizations utilized new strategies to respond to the needs of their communities, reporting a higher level of engagement with community recipients than ever before. Some challenges were specific to the disorientation and lack of preparation connected to the overnight shutdown and some are reported to be ongoing or more long-term issues. It should also be noted that many of these challenges are not new to Charlottesville or to the food security space, however the pandemic and lack of preparation for such an event along with the limitations imposed on service providers brought these problems into even more stark relief.

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

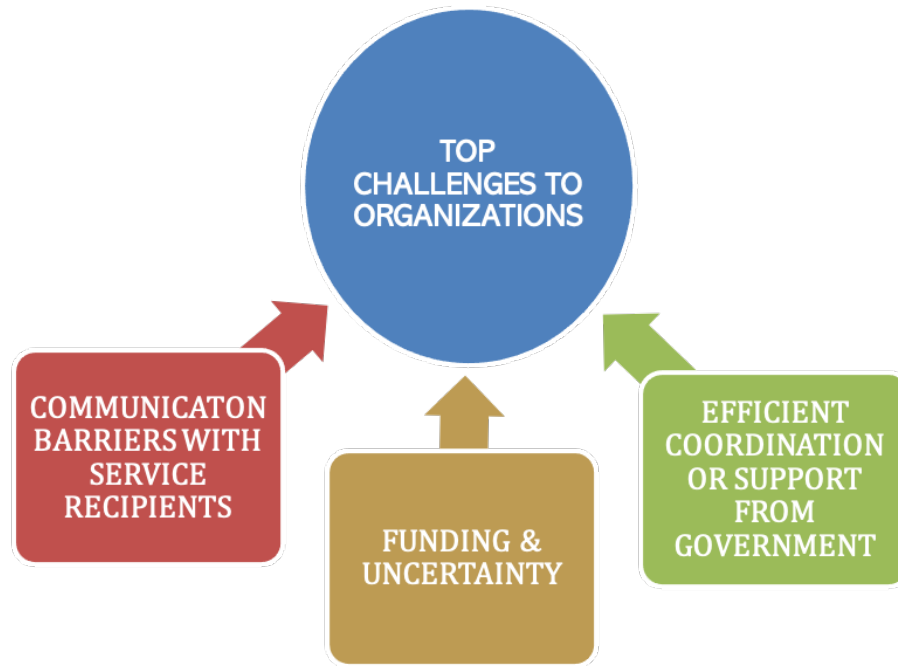


Figure 2: Top Perceived Challenges for Service Recipients during COVID-19

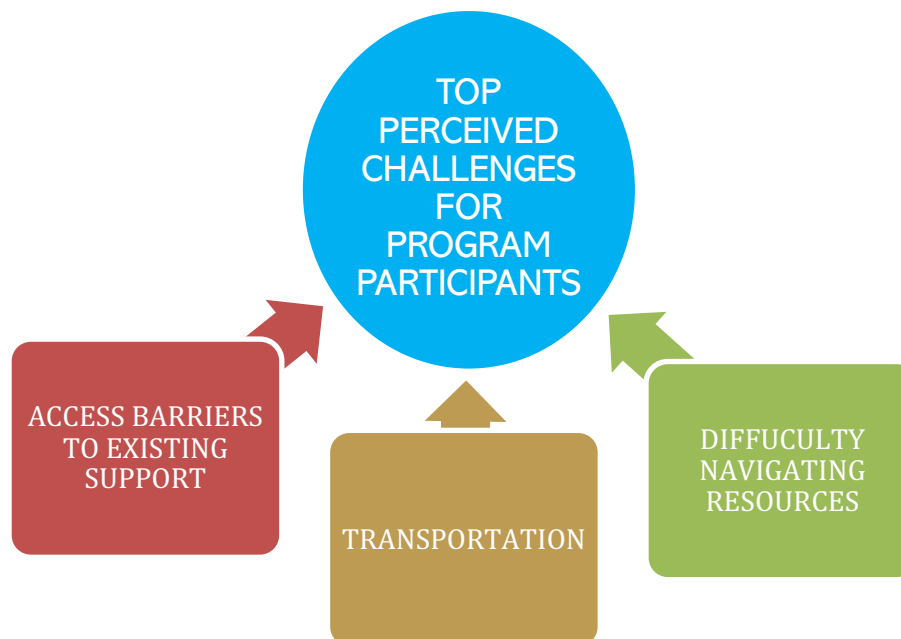


Table 3: Challenges Sited by Participants

CHALLENGES	
Barriers to information access and awareness of resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Services were complicated, disparate, and confusing: Food resources were provided by so many different groups in different ways and times and it made it really complicated to navigate. → Difficult to reach people in dispersed areas: There was success in supporting public housing and high-density areas, but harder to find, communicate with and distribute to people outside of these areas. It was more time consuming, expensive, and there were not community leaders that can help communicate and distribute resources. → Need to coordinate more investment in community representatives: Community representatives were an essential part of successful community trust and support during the pandemic and beyond. More access to interpretation of Spanish, Dari and Farsi was needed but is prohibitively expensive for smaller organizations. → Language barriers: Language barriers were cited as an ongoing major hurdle to trust building and communication. Language prevented people from being aware of services and perpetuated mistrust and the idea that some services are only for some people. → United Way discontinued updating their comprehensive community resource list which was previously the go-to for all the available resources in the area. This was an important tool for service providers and public alike. → UVA's "Pieces" community referral system is being discontinued and there is currently no replacement.
Consistent service recipient feedback and collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → While many partners described using surveys and community representatives to tailor meals, foods offered or other service delivery details, others still voiced a need for going farther and including more strategies for safely giving feedback to service providers, and for that feedback to be acted upon. → Partners emphasized the need to compensate community members who give their time on surveys and other time-consuming activities. → Families not knowing how to report an issue. → Expressed need for more inclusion of community members actively engaged in the design of programs from the beginning and being compensated for their time.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Consistent methods for service recipient feedback, particularly in the school system. → The emergency environment required organizations to make decisions without community input at times and yet these decisions had to be made. This was a challenging line to straddle.
Funding/Uncertainty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Many service providers projected deficits in the coming year. Without the ability to run their typical fundraising events and with concerns over donor fatigue, the funding climate is murky and even more of a challenge than previously. → Innovations were made, new collaborative solutions were developed, however, there was a question of how to sustain funding of such solutions such as the Wraparound Services model or the free prepared meals model with FLF/WCK. → Many of the problems identified could be solved with adequate/sustained funding. → The increased uncertainty around pandemic has made it very difficult for organizations to plan programs and project fundraising needs. This was a concern for organizations across the board.
Providing healthy foods/Quality of food	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → One food pantry expressed the challenge of offering healthy foods versus easily eaten foods. → Not offering suitable food for the growing immigrant population in the food pantries; challenges offering culturally appropriate foods → For some, pandemic required a transition away from healthier foods to prepackaged and shelf stable foods. → Organizations went to lengths to offer healthy foods for emergency support, but there is still a desire for more fresh foods among service recipients. → School meals didn't translate to a delivery type of environment. (soggy, cold, etc.)
Transportation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Deliveries needed and more long-term capacity is needed for making deliveries. → There is an ongoing issue of poor and inadequate public transportation in Charlottesville particularly in the urban ring.
Lack of efficient coordination/support from local government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → At the time of the shutdown, emergency support/communication/plan was lacking between local government, or the EOC and the emergency service providers. Organizations were left to fend for themselves and in the first two-week secure PPE and other supplies on their own. Unsure if this is remedied. → Emergency support organizations were not prioritized for PPE and other important supplies and yet are filling an essential service. If they do not remain in operation the emergency will compound. → An effective and transparent two-way communication structure did not exist within the food security community and local government which inhibited ability for food security



	organization to transition into new operations. FJN has worked on developing this plan, however, it is unknown the extent to which this has been formalized with the Emergency Operation Center (EOC).
Balancing emergency response with long term food justice work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → There was a concern among partners that the emergency need for food assistance will undermine and distract from longer term system change, in particular the goals and actions outlined in the Food Equity Initiative. This was especially true with respect to available funding. → Organizations had to pivot to emergency support and were struggling to maintain long term food justice activities at the same time. (lack of capacity).
Maintaining enrollment/enrolling in government benefits programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Many women needed more support staying enrolled in WIC as this was a big access barrier. → Helping qualifying families enroll/re-enroll in SNAP; especially non-English speaking families.
Food provided not being used	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Many kids must fend for themselves for food at home and when their family receives bulk groceries this doesn't do them a lot of good – kids need ready-made/prepared foods. → While it was not clear the reason, one community representative observed grocery donations going unused. More insight into the reasons why would help to develop a solution.
Loss of Volunteers (early challenge)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → UVA closing caused immediate loss of volunteers for many organizations (loss of student volunteers). → Loss of senior volunteers - Seniors make up a large percentage of volunteers and were also in high-risk category for COVID-19. → Concern for loss of parent/teacher volunteer after summer - At the end of summer, parents and teachers who were helping with food support to youth had to go back to work and/or supporting virtual learning. Required delivering food less frequency but in larger quantities.
Burnout	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → With the protracted crisis, many service providers mentioned that worked overtime for several months and are totally burnt out.

"I don't know, I'm like sometimes I'm in awe of all this stuff that we've done. I'm also just like tired because we have to keep doing it and the pandemic's not over."

-Focus Group Participant



Further Thoughts on Challenges

Awareness of and Access to Resources

Awareness of and access to resources was cited as a multi-faceted issue for both service providers and community representatives. Service recipients faced communication barriers in finding out everything they needed. When the government shutdown, many service recipients falsely thought all of the nonprofits they could go to for support were also closed. Additionally, many who were the targeted audience for service providers 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 who need help with food 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 service providers 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. Service providers were well aware of the challenge and took steps to offer more interpretation but this was expensive.

Several community representatives noted that these barriers gave the appearance that some services were 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 services were 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 used in limited programs.

Robust Community Collaboration

While there were some examples of bringing community members in as partners in problem solving and program design, and of integrating community feedback mechanisms as a regular practice, many service providers and community representatives also cited the challenges around truly integrating community members and partners and developing robust, safe and transparent feedback mechanisms. Many review participants noted the success of using community representatives to support trust building, program design outreach and feedback.

Funding & Uncertainty

See concerns section.

Healthy and Culturally Appropriate Food

As Charlottesville continues to become more diverse through its increasing immigrant and refugee populations, the ability for service providers to provide culturally appropriate foods becomes more important and yet more challenging and nuanced. For program participants, community representatives report that they had difficulty finding foods that were Halal, vegetarian, or appropriate for the family's cultural background. It was also suggested that some families turned down food despite being food insecure because the food offered is not what that family uses culturally and they preferred someone else use it. Without this level of understanding between the program partners and participants, the partners might deduce that the family didn't need assistance, when in fact that was not the case at all.

Survey responses indicated that there was a large variance for both partners and participants in agreeing that the food provided is culturally appropriate. While some recipients strongly agreed, many respondents did not.

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 services and shelter in place. However, respondents listed inadequate public transportation and the cost of increasing fleet vehicles for improved service delivery as ongoing challenges to eliminating geography as a barrier to service 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 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 the food insecure 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. 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 their own to evaluate and improve upon its response plan for the future.

“I think the thing that COVID has shown me is just how broken government is and that nonprofits had to come in in these ways and do things that the government should be doing...It really is just a failing of the government throughout all of this that nonprofits have to come in and do the work and are saying we’re spending the money on this because you can’t figure out how to make a resource available.”

-Focus group participant

Balancing Emergency Response with Long-Term Food Justice

Service providers also faced challenges balancing their work ensuring short term access to food security and support while recognizing they still have to tackle the long-term needs of the community. Some organizations tried to alleviate some of this tension by working to help people become enrolled in support systems they qualify for like SNAP and WIC.

Without an action plan between government and food security organizations for a future emergency, emergency response decisions will be made rapidly without the care and forethought a plan could offer. This focus on emergency support prevents long term systemic progress and causes assumptions to be made about what the community needs and wants. There is a need to prioritize long term solutions that build towards food equity and embedding sustainable infrastructure for community food security.

The bigger picture is to kind of get out of that emergency mode so much and have resources there on a regular basis which I know is hard, but also people tend to get comfortable with giving the way that is comfortable for them, so it’s like “Okay, hey, I’m giving out a meal today, I did my good deed,” but maybe that person doesn’t just need a meal. Maybe the only reason why they need a meal is because they really need a job, and maybe they can’t get a job because they need a GED, or maybe they can’t get their GED because they don’t have child care - you know what I mean. So, I know it’s not anything that can happen overnight but it’s going to take more of us getting more to the root of the problem if we really want people to be completely self-sufficient.”

-Focus group participant.

“I think for us, or at least for me personally, it is a challenging line to straddle, feeling like we have one foot in this space of still wanting to make sure that people just aren’t hungry, right, like at the end of the day, that’s what our work in COVID has been, is just trying to ensure that people aren’t hungry in



this moment when there is so much economic uncertainty and there was such great job loss in our community.”

– Focus group participant

Loss of volunteers

An early and ongoing challenge to service providers during the pandemic was the loss of volunteers. For some organizations, volunteers make up 70% of the workforce. Seniors and college students made up a large percentage of volunteer bases for most organizations. The pandemic threatened seniors' safety and the shutdown caused college students to leave Charlottesville as classes move to a virtual format. Over the summer months, some organizations re-established new volunteer support in parents and teachers, only to lose these volunteers as school began again in August.

Part of securing a steady stream of volunteers depended on service providers' ability to keep their volunteers safe. It was an ongoing challenge to protect the health of volunteers and workers alike and it was challenging to secure enough personal protective equipment initially. It was challenging mitigating the potential for exposure to COVID-19 and keeping up with what the standards should actually be to ensure safety.

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

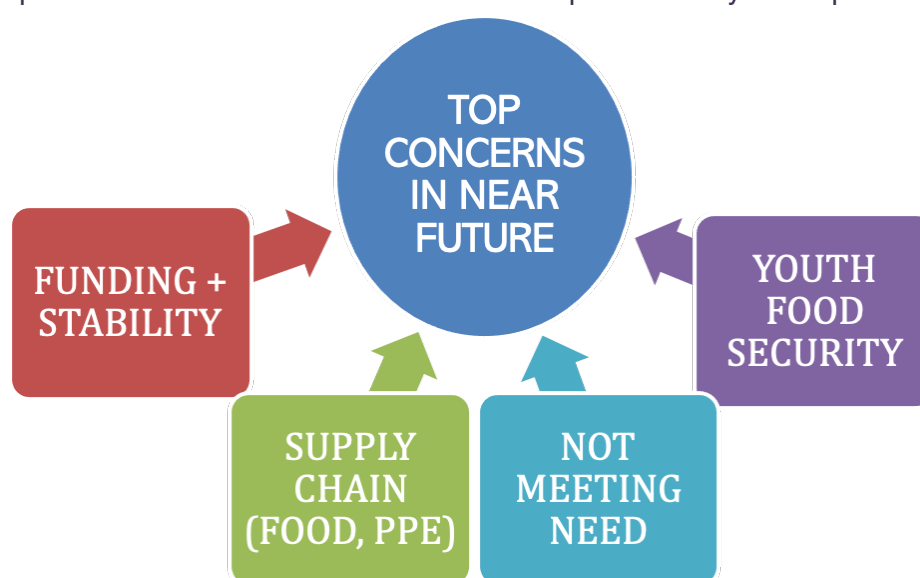


Table 4: Summary of Key Points of Concern from Focus Groups and Surveys

Concerns	
Youth Food Security	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Children not having dinner → Groceries provided were not what kids needed in some cases → Worries about youth during school closures and summer months → Youth not accessing the school meals program → School food provided going uneaten because it was not designed to travel
People Experiencing Food Insecurity Not Receiving Assistance/Not Enough Assistance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Not knowing about pockets of food insecurity and therefore not being able to help → People “slipping through the cracks” → Language barriers → Lack of trust between people experiencing food insecurity and some government agencies that are available to provide support → Providers worried that they didn’t know where the greatest needs were
Funding/Instability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Fears about “funder fatigue with increased and sustained need → Worries that food justice activities will not be funded in parallel to emergency food needs causing a backsliding in progress → Ongoing concerns about deficits and tight margins that organizations have run on to meet basic needs for food during the pandemic
Supply Chain Instability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Concerns about having enough PPE, food, and other supplies ongoing → Concerns about the fragility of the food supply chain
Volunteers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Worries that teams would have enough volunteers to execute their distribution plans in the future.
Lack of formalized improvements to emergency response plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Has local government made efforts to improve its response practices and systems? → No revised action plan has been made to the knowledge of some review participants
Safety/health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Points of food distribution being safe and not acting as “super spreaders” → Safety of service provider staff and volunteers → Overall wellbeing of staff- concerns about burnout

Further Thoughts on Concerns for the Near Future

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.

“My biggest concern is we [service providers] are maybe there for an hour or an hour and a half, and what about the other 23 hours? In a perfect world the kids sleep for eight hours a night and that's not happening, and not knowing if they are eating when we leave... we've got breakfast, we may be there for lunch, but then after 2 o'clock to the next day—that is my biggest concern.”

-Focus Group Participant

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.

“If anything, I think it kind of opened some folks' eyes to how marginalized we really still are.”

- Focus group participant

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.

“...Since the beginning of the pandemic, and especially with all of the constant news coverage about food lines at food banks..., there has been so much focus and public awareness around addressing food insecurity lately. Lots of people wanting to volunteer, lots of people wanting to be first time donors, lot of people wanting to be innovative and start up a new program. And as we get into the long-haul phase of this [pandemic], a lot of that is going to go away, and the need is still going to be there, and the gaps that we are not addressing now are only going to widen.”

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. (Aday, 2020) 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

Recommendation Process

Recommendations were isolated from focus group and survey conversations and by the review team through reviewing the challenges. The recommendations are starting points that may require further research and input from key stakeholders.

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 service providers, hear about and understand what services

are available to them, clarify confusion, advocate for the rights and needs of their communities, interpret information into 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 equity-based 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 service providers 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 services 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 service providers 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 service providers. Funding is a major barrier to accessing phone interpretation, but perhaps this or a collective system in which organizations 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.

Many 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 service recipients, 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.

Appendix I: Equity-Based Response Strategies Checklist

Strong Communities

1. Employ the FJN Framework to establish a diverse, collaborative relationship, trust and reciprocity.
2. Develop a collaborative values framework that all emergency response partner organizations sign off on. (“Open Letter...”, 2020)
3. Develop a vision for what resilience looks like with community stakeholders.
4. Establish both a process for ensuring that everyone has access to what they need to be healthy, as well as what success using that process would look like (the outcome). For example, this could take the form of a collaborative values framework that all emergency response partner organizations sign off on.
5. Assign clear responsibility for adhering to those values. (Ibid)
6. Identify community needs and assets, as well as pre-existing vulnerability and resilience. (Shapiro, 2018)
7. Transparency and consistency in organizational practices and decision making.
8. Build methods of collecting direct feedback on your services into your organization’s service plan. (“Open Letter...”, 2020)
9. Empower communities to make decisions for their communities. (Frank, 2020)
10. Recognizes that vulnerable communities need more support for longer periods of time.

Justice and Fairness

11. Prioritize support to communities most at risk or most vulnerable. (Holt, 2014) (Holdman, 2019)
12. “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.
13. Remove barriers to access of resources, especially in emergency situations. (Examples include lengthy applications processes, language, invasive data collection, etc.)
14. Monitor your service activities and hold your organization accountable to its goals.
15. Include input from recipients of your organization’s assistance in decision making on processes.
16. Community members have a safe system for airing grievances with service providers.
17. Perform a retroactive measure of the [social vulnerability levels](#) of communities before COVID-19 to see what groups stand to be the most vulnerable. (Holt, 2014)

Healthy People

18. Food assistance provided is nutritious and healthful.
19. Household’s lack of transportation doesn’t hinder access to services/nutrition.

- 20. Addresses both socioeconomic and geographical barriers to services. (DeBruin, 2012)
- 21. Recognizes that vulnerable communities need more support for longer periods of time.

Culture and Identity

- 22. Respects dietary restrictions, cultural diets, and dietary choices (vegetarianism, veganism.) (Krantz, 2020)
- 23. Provides accessible information about the services available to their community
- 24. Recognizes subjectivities? Power relations, cultural contexts, and neighborhood dynamics. (Ensor, 2019)

Vibrant Farms

- 25. Emergency response strategies support local farms.
- 26. Inclusion of the rights and needs of farm workers and essential food workers.
- 27. Inclusion of local farmers and farm workers in decision making and communication.
- 28. Response strategies support minority owned farms.

Thriving Local Economies

- 29. Develop emergency response strategies that support the local economy.
- 30. Develop emergency response strategies that support minority-owned businesses.
- 31. Track and report on the investments.

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