Creative New Jersey’s Statewide Conversations – COVID-19 Response

Call #8 – May 20, 2020

Editor’s note: This summary covers the general topics and resources shared during the eighth call in a series of statewide conversations hosted by Creative New Jersey to bring together our network and help people across our state keep connected, share information, and unite in solidarity as we navigate the Coronavirus response in New Jersey.

To register for Creative New Jersey’s Statewide Conversations on COVID-19 Response, click the following link: https://bit.ly/34WETWm. For screen reader-friendly registration, use the following link: https://forms.gle/9kUIyvVkr8akMENA6 Calls take place every Wednesday in April and May 2020 (April 1, 8, 15,22 and 29; May 6, 13, and 20) at 10am. The two final calls in this series will be June 3rd and June 10th at 10am.

SUMMARY

Topic: Food Access and Security During COVID-19

Guest speaker #1: Dwayne A. Curry, M.Ed., Program Officer – Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
https://www.rwjf.org/

Guest speaker #2: Mary Celis, Director, Health Initiatives – Passaic County Food Policy Council, United Way of Passaic County
https://www.unitedwaypassaic.org/food-policy-council

Guest speaker #3: Alex Wills, Community Relations Director – Cathedral Kitchen
https://www.cathedralkitchen.org/

Resources shared by speakers and participants during the call include:

- Food banks and pantries
- Where to find info on food banks and pantries
- Farms, Farmers markets and community gardens
- Food deliveries and delivery services

Watch the full recording of this conversation here: https://youtu.be/GcnW7VFU6XU
Dwayne A. Curry, M.Ed. (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation)
https://www.rwjf.org/

Dwayne Curry work at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) focuses on the health of children and families throughout the country, with the goal of ensuring that all families regardless of background or income have the opportunities that they need to thrive. Those opportunities include being able to foster a healthy environment beginning at a child’s earliest age. Two of the strategies that Curry is working on include shifting mindsets so that children are seen as deserving and advancing policy around critical issues, of which food security is an essential part.


Food security and access is impacting everyone throughout the country:
- According to the USDA report in 2019 there are over 37 million Americans that struggle with hunger and 11 million of them are children.
- In New Jersey, that means there 865,000 adults who struggle with hunger (that’s 1 in 10 adults) and 26,000 children (1 in 8 children).

Pre-COVID Income Inequality:
- NJ is ranked in top 10 states for income inequality (in recent years, NJ has moved from the 12th spot to the 9th spot, trending toward worse income inequality). The only states that have rank higher than NJ in income inequality are New York, Louisiana, Connecticut being the top 3 and Florida and California in the top ten, as well.
- In New Jersey there is a narrative of two states in one - rich vs. poor, those who have access and those who don't.
  - Essex, Hudson, and Mercer Counties (with Essex being at the top) have the highest income inequality in our state. The average household income in Millburn is $214,000 and not even 10 miles away in Newark, the average household income drops to $37,000. This happens throughout the state and also throughout the country.

During COVID-19:
COVID-19 has elevated issues that were often below the surface. The federal government’s COVID-19 relief package provided millions in funding to prevent hunger. Part of that funding went to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the Women, Infants, Children (WIC) supplemental nutrition program and school food programs.
- SNAP is the largest nutrition assistance program in the country:
- In 2019 it served 36 million people nationally. About 13% were elderly, 10% were families with disabilities and the rest were people under the age of 50 who did not have children.
• In New Jersey, 680,000 people were served by SNAP, of which 46% were children, 18% were elderly, and 30% were people with disabilities (which is three times the national level).

• SNAP has shown to really assistance in a number of ways:
  o Lifts people out of poverty: In 2019 3.1 million people were lifted out of poverty throughout the SNAP programs.
  o Boosts the economy (one SNAP dollar generates about $1.70 in economic activity). In New Jersey just over $1 billion was generated through SNAP and that generated about $1.7 billion in economic activity.
  o During the Pandemic there have been a lot of flexibilities within SNAP and other programs. New Jersey has been moving forward with a lot of flexibility and waivers, such as:
    ▪ Pandemic EBT allows children that would receive free and reduced lunch at school to be able to access meals by automatically transferring the subsidy for the free or reduced lunch (about $110-$114 per child) to the family’s SNAP EBT.
    ▪ For children who aren’t registered with SNAP but receive free or reduced lunches at school, that subsidy amount is sent directly to the child’s house on a card. This is really important for populations that normally would not qualify for SNAP, especially immigrant and mixed status populations.
    ▪ Waivers and flexibility with the interview process so that more people can participate in SNAP.
      ▪ Overview of increased flexibilities in response to the Pandemic and where NJ has opportunities: https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/most-states-are-using-new-flexibility-in-snap-to-respond-to-covid-19
      ▪ The USDA updates searchable database for waivers and flexibilities; search SNAP, WIC, or School Meals: https://www.fns.usda.gov/disaster/pandemic/covid-19/snap-waivers-flexibilities

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation launched $50 million dollar humanitarian relief fund in response to the pandemic. Some of that relief went to organizations like:
  • Feeding America who provide support to over 200 food banks in the country and over 600 food pantries.
  • Community FoodBank of NJ is packing about 2,000 boxes of food a day, which provide a total of approximately 80,000 meals a day. https://cfbnj.org/
  • Feeding America has a list of local food banks that are searchable by zip code: https://www.feedingamerica.org/
  • Meals on Wheels provides food to 2.2 million seniors and people with disabilities. https://www.mealsonwheelsamerica.org/
  • NJ Health Initiatives, which is a statewide grant making program of RWJF, serves a key need to reach some of the smaller communities who may not have access to charitable funding. https://www.njhi.org/
    o Some of NJHI’s grantees have been shifting their projects to focus on food.
      ▪ For example, in Perth Amboy and Somerset County have been providing food for community members or paying volunteers who are experiencing hardship or job loss.
• The NJ YMCA Alliance has been doing an excellent job of providing support for the house-less children population and getting them meals. The YMCA Alliance has been working primarily in Bergen and is increasing efforts in Passaic County. They have also been delivering hot and cold meals and hygiene products to the Trenton district.

• A number of other different efforts are happening, including:
  o School districts providing food to children
  o SNAP educators now are able to assist people in filling out SNAP benefit applications and processing.

Additional resources from Dwayne Curry:
• Urban Institute has a list of evidence based solutions as the crisis evolves: https://www.urban.org/features/covid-19-policies-protect-people-and-communities
• Healthy Eating Research supports research on policy, systems, and environmental (PSE) strategies that have strong potential to promote healthy eating among children, especially among lower-income and racial and ethnic minority population groups: https://healthyeatingresearch.org/
• Voices for Healthy Kids: https://voicesforhealthykids.org/
• Voices for Healthy Kids COVID-19 Resources: https://voicesforhealthykids.org/internal/coronavirus-covid-19-resources-you-can-use
• Voices for Healthy Kids - Grant Opportunities: https://voicesforhealthykids.org/campaign-resources/grants

Questions for RWJF included:

Q: One issue is providing undocumented community members and their families with services they need. Since they don’t qualify for SNAP, they’ve been relying on food pantries. Are there any other options for undocumented families?

A: No other resources in NJ yet. There are some upcoming efforts that may happen: for example, California is working on providing cash to undocumented families. These new models that are starting to happen can be a resource for NJ on what to do next. Check out CLASP and the National Immigration Law Center. CLASP: https://www.clasp.org/ National Immigration Law Center: https://www.nilc.org/.

Participant suggestion: City Green’s Garden State Food Network provides funding and technical support for purchases at farmer’s markets to provide more assistance for SNAP (doubling benefits). Consumer to Farmer connection has increased. Farmers are providing a direct opportunity to buy directly from them.
https://www.citygreenonline.org/gsgfn

Q: I am a teacher and my students have participated in a food drive. I am not sure if that is the best way to support food insecurity. In a recent call with Ronald McDonald House, I was told that making financial donations is the best thing to do to help. Any thoughts?
A: It depends on what you individually are most comfortable with. Provide the assistance that you can whether that is financial or volunteering or something else. Every situation is different as is what people are comfortable with -- it is up to you.

Q: What is the longer-term plan to address food insecurity? What advocacy efforts would you recommend?

A: In the current Heroes Act, there are many people who are advocating for a 15% increase in SNAP benefits. That is one example of the types of supports this Act is hoping to accomplish. There is a multilevel approach that needs to be taken - food security in addition to many the other systems (like income, childcare, etc.) that will directly impact access to food.

Q: Are there any resources for food delivery with statewide food distributions as a resource for residents with disabilities who do not have access to transportation?

A: Yes. The group is called LogistiCare – an organization that works with Medicaid and also serves people who are in need. This is a free service. Transportation has been a huge issue in regards to people being able to access food. https://www.logisticare.com/

Q: Do you have any info on food in the Atlantic City area?

A: There is a great network in AC. Recommend checking the Feeding America Link. It will provide all the information for a zip code. https://www.feedingamerica.org/

Mary Celis (Passaic County Food Policy Council, United Way of Passaic County)
https://www.unitedwaypassaic.org/food-policy-council

Passaic County Food Policy Council is a cross-sector coalition formed in 2011. The vision has been to end hunger in Passaic County by addressing the root cause of food insecurity, brings together partners from across the food system, and make healthy food more accessible and affordable to Passaic County residents. Email Mary Celis at: maryc@unitedwaypassaic.org.

In 2016, we created a Blueprint for Action through the support of New Jersey Health Initiatives with the understanding that we couldn’t really address the root cause of food insecurity without thinking about the other social determinants of health. The Blueprint for Action addresses issues around economic opportunity, community safety, access to clinical health care and continued our work to advance strategies around healthy food access.
• Communities are ecosystems and when we look at COVID-19 and how it is impacting low-income communities and communities of color disproportionately we have to think about how the ecosystem really functions and address all of the issues together. You cannot think about hunger in a vacuum.
• Other issues of inequality in the community, such as housing and education are not directly included in the work of the Food Policy Council, but we see them as a part of a whole and over the past 4 to 5 years have shifted our focus to address health disparities, for example:
  o We know that residents who live in one zip code may have a length of life that’s 15 years less than communities that live three miles on the other side of the county.

COVID-19 Healthy Food Access Challenges:
• Increased demand for emergency food.
  o Working closely with the Community Food Bank of New Jersey and they’ve increased their distribution to a Passaic County by 68% and we are seeing partners in southern Passaic county, Paterson and Clifton really low-income communities
  o Organizations are distributing emergency food at the rate of 600 times greater than before, especially in Paterson and the surrounding areas where low-income workers have been hit the hardest
• COVID-19 has impacted the southern part of the County disproportionally because of trade and transportation access to New York City, which has been the epicenter of this pandemic. The need for emergency food has skyrocketed and created supply chain shortages and food disruptions.
  o We have seen articles about farmers who have let their crops fallow because of the supply chain disruptions to restaurants, schools and all the other places that we’re purchasing food.
  o Food system workforce shortages as workers are testing positive, people needed more physical space in order to work due to social distancing.
• Healthy food is incredibly important to build people’s immune systems – which is especially important for the most vulnerable within the community, like seniors and the house-less population. For medically vulnerable populations we have seen increased costs due to additional expenses (PPE, cleaning supplies, packaging, etc.)
• We have seen a decrease in volunteers as many are not feeling comfortable being out of their homes.
• There has also been a decrease in donations to nonprofits due to the economic downturn and not being able to raise funds through things like galas and other fundraising events. That has been hitting the bottom line of nonprofits, especially those on the front lines.

Areas of innovation and opportunities / Coalition and partnerships:
• The Passaic County Pandemic Partnership includes: CUMAC, Paterson Habitat for Humanity, Passaic County Casa, OASIS, Star of Hope Ministries and the Boys and Girls Club of Paterson and Passaic.
• In an effort to continue to bring healthy foods into our communities, particularly where there isn’t access, some of the wards in Paterson and other places have continued to expand healthy corner stores and small business support to ensure that those businesses have healthy food available. The Community Food Bank of New Jersey has been a strong leader in that area.
• The Common Market which is a mission driven nonprofit food distributor based out of Philadelphia that’s been working in New Jersey to increase local food procurement: https://www.thecommonmarket.org/
  o Secured 2,000 farm produce boxes that will be distributed to seniors next week.
• Systems that were broken or challenged before COVID-19, including the food system, have come undone. We want to support policies, systems and environmental changes to think about long-term solutions and how we’re going to leverage dollars to build more resilient communities.
  o Investing in food systems are key
  o Continue to promote/expand community gardens and virtual wellness programs.
  o Farmers markets are working closely with City Green – these farmers markets have doubled the value of SNAP dollars and people are feeling safer going to open-air farmers markets than a grocery store. https://www.citygreenonline.org/gsgfn
  o Thinking about having a Veggie Mobile that are mobile farmers markets that can come to senior centers
• The City of Paterson is innovating and launched the “Neighbor Express” platform to deliver groceries to seniors and we are excited partners that can have been assisting by supplying volunteers. https://paterson.neighborexpress.org/
• In Paterson’s the school district, their driver teams had to quarantine, so nonprofit partners stepped in and donated trucks and drivers to be able to make sure that those three distribution sites at schools can continue to function. Paterson Public Schools is leading the way in terms of feeding students - power of the coalition that is communicating and working together to make this happen.

What you can do:
Collective impact is key here, and it’s important to identify a common agenda and a shared vision to create efficiencies and coordinate activities where we can have a much greater impact than we would if we functioned as individual organizations.
• Working together as we face resource scarcity, we must collaborate and leverage volunteer teams, share information so that we are addressing the needs of vulnerable populations. We’ve been able to identify families that need to quarantine and where food insecurity exists our partners make deliveries using volunteers to reach those families.

Alex Wills (Cathedral Kitchen)
https://www.cathedralkitchen.org/

Cathedral Kitchen is Camden’s largest soup kitchen and food provider, serving an average of 300 people per day. You can contact Alex Wills via email at: alex@cathedralkitchen.org
About Cathedral Kitchen

- Numbers have pretty much stayed the same, though March and April were a little high, and now we’re a little bit lower.
- We continue to serve dinner Monday-Friday from 3:15pm to 5:00pm, and Lunch on Saturday 12pm to 1pm (closed on Sunday).
- Pre-COVID – we have a dental service, culinary and baking program, food truck, garden, contract catering and a cafe. Some of those programs have had to be put on hold or have needed to shift at present.
- Cathedral Kitchen also prepares 1,600 meals each day for eight local halfway houses and shelters in Camden.
- Three quarters of the population serviced are men and about a quarter are women, and a very limited number of families.

Adjustments to our work:

- Changes to distribution policy while continuing to maintain the main mission of serving food to guests each day.
  - Since guests can’t come into the dining room presently, we are serving a hot takeaway meal plus a second bag of takeaway food and bottle of water. We have a flood of support from volunteers, local churches and mosques. Subsequently, we’ve been able to distribute as many as five meat and cheese sandwiches each day, a healthy snack such as protein bars, granola bars or trail mix, and fruit in the secondary takeaway food bag.
  - The dental clinic is suspended and our nurses are set to come back in June
  - Catering has been suspended, but we continue to do 1600 meals each day, 7 days a week, for the eight local halfway houses and shelters seven days a week so we are still doing that contract.
  - The Culinary and Baking program has been suspended
  - Food donations from restaurants that have closed or curtailed their activities has decreased so we are purchasing a lot more food and of course our income is down due to no catering and the cafe being closed.
  - Suspending volunteers for the past 2 months, we are volunteer-driven so our staff is working full-force
  - Social distancing is working out well through markings on the street and we have been getting a lot of support from law enforcement with help encouraging that.
  - Due to social distancing and quarantining, some of the people and organizations we usually provide food to have not been able to accept deliveries or pick up food from Cathedral Kitchen. That’s starting to open a bit: Usually, Cathedral Kitchen provides food to three senior centers in Camden – right now we’re only serving one but hope to be able to serve the other two soon. And we’re able to provide food for Urban Promise’s youth programs
- While our guests are with us:
  - Providing people with literature on washing hands and staying safe, and symptoms of COVID.
  - The County set up two port-a-potties outside the facility and two wash stations out front.
  - Toiletries and socks are also a big need - providing them with toiletries 3 days a week.
Starting to be able to give masks to guests themselves. Income is down and the need to purchase food has increased, but there has been an outpouring of support through in-kind donations and financial donations.

Ways people can help:

- Financial support, if you can.
- Cathedral Kitchen is asking for sample size donations of toiletries - hand lotion, body lotion, toothpaste, full-size toothbrushes, full-size deodorant, sanitizer, soap – and socks. You can never have enough socks.
- There are a lot of programs in Camden that are working together to help combat this issue and help the families in Camden.
  - Cooper’s Ferry working with the South Jersey Food Bank
  - Farmers Against Hunger - providing 10,000 pounds of produce and milk to hundreds of families in Camden
  - South Jersey Food Bank has a list that is extensive with all the food pantries.
  - Meals on Wheels is delivering
  - Catholic Charities and others.
  - Camden Coalition has a lot of good resources

Questions for Passaic County Food Policy Council and Cathedral Kitchen:

Q: What about for people with disabilities outside of the Medicaid system?

A: (Alex Wills) Cathedral Kitchen will provide food to anyone but they are unable to deliver to individuals.

Q: How can people find out more information on what is happening in their county?

A: (Mary Celis) United Ways respond to community needs. I’m not aware of any other United Ways that have a Food Policy Council. However, there is a need for more of this, and I’m happy to talk with folks about how to get started with a coalition in different counties to combat the challenges. Reach out to your local food bank, for sure - they have been funded to provide more food and many have been able to change the way they are operating in terms of deliveries. They are doing more prepared meals, especially for seniors, emergency food boxes. The USDA just funded $3 billion to purchase from local farmers and distribute through food distributors. NJ should have access to these farm produce boxes with no requirements on who they get delivered to.

Participant suggestion resource: Together North Jersey - Food Access Project through the Livable Task Force. That has great resources. This conversation is going to be continuing through Together North Jersey. www.togethernorthjersey.com.

RESOURCES

Additional resources shared by participants on our call:

Food banks and pantries:
- Community Food Bank of NJ: https://cfbnj.org/
- Fulfill NJ of Monmouth & Ocean County: https://fulfillnj.org/
- Beat Center: https://thebeatcenter.org/
- NJ Food Processors Association: https://www.njfoodprocessors.org/covid-19-resources
- Bridge of Peace Community Church (2755 Tuckahoe Rd, Camden, Mondays, 6-7:30pm, need ID and verification of # in household)
- Kroc Center Emergency Food Service 856-379-6900 (by appointment only)
- Catholic Charities Food Assistance 856-845-9200 (hours to call 8:30am-4pm)
- Touch New Jersey Food Pantry 856-803-3030 (Tue, Wed, Fri, 9-noon, 549 State St., need photo ID)
- Passaic County CASA: https://www.passaiccountycasa.org/covid19food
- Newark Emergency Services is also having a food distribution tomorrow from 9am-12 at 982 Broad St. Newark, NJ 07102 all must come with i.d. and wear a face mask
- Lunchbreak: www.lunchbreak.org
- NJ211

Where to find info on food banks and pantries:
- Find Food Pantries in NJ by County: https://www.foodpantries.org/st/new_jersey AND https://cfbnj.org/findfood/
- NJVOAD - Food Access call every Thursday at 11am. Collecting lists of all the pantries in NJ. http://www.njvoad.org/
- Folks can also call the Office on Aging and Disabilities in their counties.
- Center for Food Access: https://cfanj.org/

Farms, Farmers markets and community gardens:
- Interesting efforts in Newark regarding to adopt vacant lots for community gardens: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4UehTW3QnZA
- Virtual Mobile Farmers Market https://www.virtua.org/about/mobile-farmers-market (for current info on hours and location plans)

Food deliveries and delivery services:
• Mobile, neighborhood grocery shopping. https://www.optimistdaily.com/2020/05/these-trucks-bring-the-grocery-store-to-your-neighborhood/
• Neighbor Express - grocery delivery: https://paterson.neighborexpress.org/
• Meals on Wheels (Seniors only, Camden area) 856-374-6325; or find one near you: https://www.mealsonwheelsamerica.org/
• LogistiCare: https://www.logisticare.com/

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