



MEMORANDUM

TO: Mayor and Council

THRU: Chris Shorter, Assistant City Manager

FROM: Lucia Athens, Chief Sustainability Officer
Stephanie Hayden, Austin Public Health Director

DATE: April 6, 2020

SUBJECT: Update on Food Access Needs and Emergency Feeding Response to COVID-19

This memorandum serves to provide updates on the impact of COVID-19 to food insecurity within the community and the steps that staff are taking to address critical food access needs. The issues addressed in this memorandum include: (1) Emergency Coordination and Information Sharing; (2) Emergency Food Distribution to Food Insecure Individuals and Families; (3) Food Access for Populations Experiencing Homelessness; and (4) Farmers Markets. The intention of the memo is to highlight efforts being led by the City of Austin in collaboration with other entities; it is not an exhaustive inventory of all emergency food-related efforts underway in the Austin area. However, many worthy efforts and heartening volunteer initiatives are emerging across our community, and these are to be applauded. Some of the organizations stepping up in this time of need are the University of Texas at Austin Events and Moving Crew, Alamo Drafthouse, and Ford Motor Company, to name only a few. Their efforts, as well as those of organizations too numerous to list here, are greatly appreciated.

COVID-19 Closure Exemptions for Food Providers

The Mayor's March 17th order directing the closure of all non-essential businesses specifically exempts grocery stores. Pursuant to the Order, "grocery stores" includes warehouse stores, big box stores, bodegas, gas stations, farmers' markets, or food pantries that provide or sell food products." Food pantries and emergency feeding operations provide an essential service to the community in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, ensuring that vulnerable populations maintain access to food while adhering to the "Stay Home, Work Safe" directive and other public health guidelines related to physical distancing. Staff from these organizations are working on the front lines of the pandemic and may continue operations as usual. City staff are in regular communications with the Emergency Operations Center and the City Manager's office to ensure that these essential operations continue while still considering the health and safety of staff and individuals served. This information is re-iterated here because there continues to be confusion in the community as to whether food providers may continue operations.

Emergency Coordination and Information Sharing

Austin Public Health (APH) is leading the City's overall response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Office of Sustainability is taking the lead on food systems issues related to the City's response. To coordinate an emergency feeding response, the Office of Sustainability is working in close partnership with Austin Public Health, the City's Economic Development Department, Travis County HHS, the City's Emergency Operations Center, and the City Manager's Office.

On March 16, the Food Access Task Force began working within the Social Services Branch of the Incident Command Structure of the City of Austin's Emergency Operations Center. This group represents approximately seventy-five organizations, including ten City departments, Travis County, school districts, nonprofit organizations, and direct service providers. The task force is closely coordinating to identify areas of need, opportunities for collaboration, and allocation of available resources. They are also working to develop a longer-term strategy for the anticipated increase in food access needs throughout our community. In addition to regularly scheduled calls, the Office of Sustainability is in constant communication with individual partner organizations and sends a daily food system update to the Food Access Task Force. City staff are also tracking federal and state responses to COVID-19 that may impact food access, the local food economy, and new funding resources.

City staff and emergency feeding organizations are **directing all community members in need of emergency food resources to call 2-1-1 or visit connectatx.org**. The United Way of Greater Austin maintains an updated list of emergency food access points and is providing weekly updates on call volume and requested needs. Office of Sustainability staff are currently developing an online map of food resources that will be shared in partnership with United Way to provide up-to-date information on the availability and location of emergency feeding operations and school meal sites.

In partnership with the City's Office of Design and Delivery and the Design Institute for Health at UT-Dell Medical School, the Office of Sustainability is also directing organizations and businesses to the ATX Emergency Food Systems Exchange (<https://atxemergencyfoodsystems.trydiscourse.com/>). This forum serves as an online platform for unmet needs, resource matching between organizations, and facilitating coordination in response to COVID-19. External partners are encouraged to share the link to the Food Systems Exchange in their public messaging, in addition to information about the 2-1-1 hotline and ConnectATX (<https://www.connectatx.org>).

Emergency Food Distribution to Food Insecure Individuals and Families

The COVID-19 pandemic has put our most vulnerable community members at risk of losing access to food. In particular, community members that faced barriers to food access prior to the pandemic are an immediate priority. City staff are also concerned about the documented increase in demand for emergency food resources resulting from the economic impact of COVID-19.

Some service providers are experiencing challenges in continuing their normal services in light of this new and rapidly evolving situation. City staff are working with a network of direct service providers, including Keep Austin Fed and the Central Texas Food Bank, to coordinate emergency food distribution through existing service networks and find new ways to fill service gaps as they arise.

City staff are currently reviewing two proposals and working to identify funding for innovative food distribution models that would leverage existing supply chain and logistics processes, and support the local economy by engaging restaurants and other local businesses.

1. Emergency Meal Distribution for Food Insecure Families

Keep Austin Together, a network of Austin-based commercial kitchens and non-profits, has submitted a proposal to provide emergency prepared meals to hard-to-reach community members. Meals would be distributed as needs are identified by community-based organizations. This solution expands the reach of emergency food access services while stabilizing local food sector businesses.

2. Emergency Food Box Distribution Network: Neighborhood-Based Food Access

The Sustainable Food Center and Foodshed Investors have submitted a proposal to establish a micro-distribution model using currently idle restaurant infrastructure. Using this model, boxes of fresh produce and other shelf-stable foods would be sold online or over the phone and made available for pick-up. Service for SNAP and WIC clients would be prioritized. City staff, in consultation with the Equity Office, would determine criteria for participating restaurants based on location, existing capacity and infrastructure, and communities served. Existing funds from Slow Food Austin are available to start this pilot, and City funds could assist in scaling the model to serve more residents.

In addition, City staff are coordinating various types of assistance to address some shortfalls that are occurring related to food pantry and meal delivery support, such as:

- Temporary cooler space was provided by the Austin Convention Center to assist local nonprofit Keep Austin Fed.
- City staff was able to match loaned vehicles from the Ford Motor Company to Meals on Wheels to provide emergency transportation resources.
- In some cases, City staff who are available for reassignment to emergency operations are being sent to food pantries to assist with social distancing restrictions and providing guidance for proper hygiene.
- Austin Transportation Department has teamed up with Good Apple to launch Stay Home, Stay Healthy: a free delivery service bringing fresh produce and pantry staples to vulnerable community members' doorsteps.

Food Access for Populations Experiencing Homelessness

There are complex challenges associated with meeting people experiencing homelessness where they are with food resources. To ensure the health and safety of everyone in our community, the Food Access Task Force and Homelessness Task Force are working with county, nonprofit, and social service providers to create an appropriate multi-pronged approach that reflects the diverse situations and needs of people experiencing homelessness. In addition to the need for providing prepared meals, staff has identified a resounding request from social service providers that serve individuals experiencing homelessness. Several organizations have communicated the need to provide individuals with 7-14 days of shelf-stable foods. Providing shelf-stable foods to people experiencing homelessness would reduce contact and potential exposure, allowing food recipients and food distributors to better adhere to public health guidelines.

In developing a multi-pronged approach, City staff are balancing:

- Sourcing food quickly while investing in the shifting local economy
- Meeting the varying food needs of a diverse population
- Distribution that deters large gatherings and promotes social distancing
- Utilizing existing connections to people experiencing homelessness while increasing the amount of services provided
- Showing care and compassion without increasing risk of exposure

City staff are reviewing two proposals for emergency food distribution to homeless individuals and families in need.

1. Revolution Foods - Emergency Food Distribution

City staff has received a proposal from Revolution Foods (a certified B-corporation) to provide emergency prepared meals, and potentially shelf-stable goods, at up to fifty City-sponsored sites. Meal distribution could take place at existing locations that currently have limited operations, such as food pantries and soup kitchens, or at City facilities that will be identified. These operations could scale up as needed. Austin Public Health staff have prepared an RCA for the April 9th City Council agenda to approve a contract with Revolution Foods in the amount of \$400,000.

2. Central Texas Food Bank and The Other Ones Foundation

The Central Texas Food Bank has the capacity with existing funds to immediately provide one-thousand bags of shelf-stable foods for the next six weeks. These food donations will be combined with \$10,000 worth of food provided from the Other Ones Foundation to bring immediate relief to people experiencing homelessness. The Austin Convention Center will serve as the central preparation hub to assemble these non-perishable food bags and Parks and Recreation Department staff will be leading the on-site logistics. City staff and direct service providers will work together to distribute these bags to people experiencing homelessness, focusing on sites that have additional City services like handwashing stations and trash collection through the Violet Bag program. This service could potentially be extended after the initial six weeks, but additional funding would be needed.

Ultimately, the team plans to enact a community approach that meets the challenges described with integrity, safety, innovation, and equity. Any distribution of foods, whether prepared or shelf-stable, will be conducted by people with existing connections to these vulnerable communities, or through an on-boarding process that ensures public safety, social distancing, and a compassionate approach. A combined approach may be necessary to address specific needs for people experiencing homelessness. Access to personal protective equipment is also a critical and ongoing need expressed by service providers in this community.

Farmers Markets

Farmers markets are considered essential services and are therefore not subject to orders directing individuals to "Stay Home, Work Safe" or the closure of food establishments. All six area farmers markets remain open, and are practicing social distancing and precautionary health measures. The Office of Sustainability is working with local farmers, market operators, and vendors to address immediate needs and plan for an ongoing and contingent situation. Emergency funding support of \$2,000 per Farmers Market is being provided by the Office of Sustainability. The markets will use this funding to address immediate operational needs such as providing personal protective equipment and hand-washing stations. In addition, City staff who are available for reassignment are being requested for some Farmers Markets to assist with social distancing restrictions and helping to provide guidance for proper hygiene.

Questions

If you have any questions or need further information about any of these efforts, please utilize the Council COVID-19 Q&A Portal. We have a team monitoring the system and working with the EOC and various departments to provide responses as quickly as possible.

CC: Spencer Cronk, City Manager