



MEMORANDUM

TO: Mayor and Council

THRU: Shannon Jones, Interim Assistant City Manager

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

DATE: January 26, 2021

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

Background and purpose: In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, City and County staff have been working with nonprofits, local food businesses, school districts, and other direct service providers to support a range of strategies that will improve access to food. Office of Sustainability staff, in close collaboration with Austin Public Health (APH), are supporting the numerous organizations providing services to the community, documenting emerging food access needs, communicating needs to City leadership, identifying and planning strategies to improve food access, and tracking external developments that may affect food access and food insecurity locally.

This memorandum provides an update on the City's food access response to COVID-19 and the pandemic's impact on food insecurity in the community. Areas of work addressed include: 1) [Summary of Funding for Programs](#), 2) [Coordination, Communications, and Information Sharing](#), 3) [Food Access and Emergency Food Operations](#), 4) [Support for the Local Food Economy to Improve Food Access](#), 5) [State and Federal Policy](#), and 6) [Considerations for Addressing Food Insecurity in 2021](#).

- 1) Summary of Funding for Programs.** The City of Austin provided approximately \$9,629,000 of funding for food access initiatives from the beginning of the pandemic response through December 2020. During this same timeframe, Travis County provided \$1,692,400 of funding for food access initiatives. The City and the County have also committed an additional \$10,529,000 for food access programs in FY 2021. Numerous other organizations have also provided resources to community groups and individuals for emergency food access, such as the United Way's All Together ATX fund, St David's Foundation, and the Michael and Susan Dell Foundation. A summary of all City and County funding for COVID 19 Emergency Food Access programs can be found in [Appendix A](#).

2) Coordination, Communications, and Information Sharing. In coordination with APH, the Office of Sustainability continues to lead the Food Access Task Force as a strategy group within the Social Services Branch of the Emergency Operations Center (EOC). The group has over 75 participating organizations, with a distribution list of over 300 individual contacts. City staff and emergency feeding organizations are still directing all community members in need of emergency food resources to call 2-1-1 or visit www.connectatx.org. With support of the EOC Joint Information System, the task force developed and printed a flyer to communicate this messaging in both English and Spanish ([see Appendix B](#)). *Regular communication with internal and external partners include:*

- City of Austin
 - Austin Public Health (Homeless Services Division, Neighborhood Services, WIC, Social Services)
 - Economic Development Department
 - Office of Design and Delivery
 - Parks and Recreation Department
- Travis County Community Centers
- Task forces within the EOC's Incident Command Structure (Health Equity, Childcare & Schools, Community Services, Homelessness, Pro-Lodges, and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) & Logistics)

Documenting unmet and emerging food needs is a top priority to ensure the City's COVID-19 response reaches all community members. In partnership with United Way for Greater Austin, staff created a [map of emergency food resources](#) to document the availability and location of emergency feeding operations and school meal sites.

Staff are currently working with the UT School of Public Health and the Community Engagement and Health Equity Division of UT Dell Medical School to further identify populations with the highest food access needs. In March and April of 2020, there was a 51.7% increase in overall call volume to 2-1-1, as well as a **160.5% increase in calls related to food needs**, compared to data from March and April 2019. The top 10 zip codes that had the most food access calls from May through August 2020 were:

- | | | |
|---------|---------|---------|
| ○ 78753 | ○ 78745 | ○ 78702 |
| ○ 78741 | ○ 78723 | ○ 78752 |
| ○ 78758 | ○ 78660 | |
| ○ 78744 | ○ 78724 | |

3) Food Access and Emergency Food Operations. A comprehensive food access response requires a range of strategies to meet the food needs of all residents. The following ongoing initiatives help to meet specific food access challenges of high-need populations:

Eating Apart Together (EAT) Initiative: A cross-departmental team of City staff organized with community partners to develop a two-pronged food delivery approach that leverages City resources to procure, organize, and store food while the county, churches, and nonprofits deliver meals to people in need. Since April, the Initiative has delivered more than 10,000 meals each week to Austin's homeless community, as well as thousands of other supplies. Intended as a temporary stopgap to prevent hunger and reduce travel during COVID-19, EAT has funding through the end of March 2021.

Office of Sustainability Support: Funds from the Office of Sustainability and the Austin Transportation Department allowed Good Apple's "Stay Home, Stay Healthy" initiative, which provides weekly grocery delivery service to elderly and immunocompromised residents in East Austin, to expand and scale by 2,000 additional deliveries. Funding has also been allocated to Keep Austin Fed, Farmshare Austin, Urban Roots, and Drive-a-Senior West. These organizations provide specialized services to populations with unique needs, and/or focus on food system equity as the central mechanism to improve food access.

Caregiver Meals at School Meal Sites: In response to community feedback, the Food Access Task Force circulated a survey to Nutrition Service Directors at local school districts to document the level of need. Since Austin City Council's approval of funding for caregiver meals, the Office of Sustainability has supported the implementation of this service. Funding to continue this program through September 2021 has been secured through the City of Austin and Travis County. Activities meals include:

- Austin ISD
 - Since May 19, local restaurants Easy Tiger, Henbit/Emmer and Rye, and Good Work Austin (L'Oco d'Oro, Colleen's Kitchen, Contigo, and recently added: Rosedale Kitchen) have produced over one million caregiver meals
 - Restaurant vendors are providing high-quality, healthy food for needy families and reportedly keeping around 100 local restaurant workers employed
- Del Valle and Manor ISD
 - The City of Austin provided for Del Valle ISD \$700K for 114,900 caregiver meals from July -December and Manor ISD \$20K for 11,338 meals.
 - Travis County contracted with The Cook's Nook to provide 3,000 caregiver meals daily for school districts in Eastern Travis County, simultaneously redirecting potential food waste

WIC Shopping and Delivery Pilot Program: WIC recipients face exceptionally high barriers to grocery shopping in person during the pandemic, such as caring for a newborn or immunocompromised family member, lack of access to a vehicle, or lack of childcare. The processing of WIC benefits makes it difficult for clients to use pick-up services that may be available to SNAP recipients. In response, APH-WIC staff worked to establish a pilot program in which a designated proxy can grocery shop for WIC families and provide contactless delivery. Since the program began in late June, the WIC Shopping and Delivery Program has provided shopping and delivery services to 138 WIC families.

Personal Protective Equipment: To date, over 16,000 masks and 7,000 pairs of gloves have been distributed to organizations in support of the COVID-19 emergency feeding response, as well as hand sanitizer and other supplies. The Task Force also partnered with Dell Medical School, which donated an additional 5,500 cloth face coverings and over 13,000 gloves for distribution.

4) Support for the Local Economy to Improve Food Access. COVID-19 affects the food system and supply chain at every level, including the local food economy. Several efforts are underway to support local food businesses and farmers as a mechanism to improve food access within the community.

- **Neighborhood Pop-Up Grocery**
Council approved funding for a contract with the Sustainable Food Center to implement a "pop-up grocery" model in partnership with Foodshed Investors, local restaurants, local farms, and other supply chain actors. The Neighborhood Pop-Up Grocery Project engaged 29 local

restaurants at 35 sites to serve as points of fresh and affordable food access, allowing families to travel less distance than full-service grocery stores while reducing exposure to others. This project also allowed local restaurants to generate additional revenue, increased food shopping options, and supported local farmers through sales of food that may have otherwise gone to waste. Almost all the dollars spent through the project went toward Texas-owned enterprises, benefitting the local economy overall. The project served a total of 2,602 customers and generated \$34,744 in revenue for the participating restaurants.

- **Keep Austin Together/Supplemental Emergency Deeding Access Network (SEFAN)**

Travis County provided funding to support a group of local restaurants and commercial kitchens. The group employs local food service workers to prepare meals for distribution and home delivery through a network of food recovery and emergency feeding organizations. Benefits include jobs restoration, economic development, and fair wages for veterans and those impacted by the justice system. Participants receive balanced meals that are seasonal, varied, and mindful of health. By the end of 2020, SEFAN had served nearly 300K meals, and has supported over 40 “on-the-ground” community or faith-based organizations. They now service 34 zip codes, and average 2,800 meals per day or approximately 14,000 meals per week.

- 5) **State and Federal Policy.** Policy decisions at the state and federal level continue to affect local efforts related to nutrition assistance and food access. State approval was required for local changes to school meal service, including weekend meals, curbside pick-up, and bulk seven-day meal packs. Provisions related to SNAP and other federally authorized provisions are a top priority for local food access. Emergency allocations, Pandemic-EBT food benefits (P-EBT), and Coronavirus Response SNAP (CR-SNAP) must be requested by the state agency before they can be implemented. Staff worked with the City’s Communications and Public Information Office to develop public messaging materials that were used for targeted outreach to families about the P-EBT program. In partnership with local service providers, materials were distributed online and in-person to potentially eligible families.

Participation in the SNAP Online Purchasing Pilot has become an immediate area of focus, as the potential to expand curbside and delivery services for SNAP recipients, and authorize local retailers to offer online SNAP purchases, would be a significant change requiring local attention. As of Dec. 18, 2020, H-E-B has joined Amazon and Walmart to accept SNAP payments for Curbside and Home Delivery orders.

6) **Considerations for Addressing Food Insecurity in 2021**

Future Funding Needs: Staff are working to identify and coordinate funding streams, including federal allocations and local funding opportunities. CARES Act funding may be used to reimburse specific food relief strategies, such as caregiver meal service through school districts, and the deadline for spending these funds has been extended for another year. The Office of Sustainability is working with APH, school districts, and the City’s Intergovernmental Relations Office to facilitate the reimbursement process. The Office of Sustainability staff has advocated for food access to be prioritized in the disbursement of relief funding through the All Together ATX Fund and the City’s RISE Fund. Recognizing the significant increase in food insecurity across the community, staff seeks additional ways to fund these programs through Federal, State, and philanthropic organizations.

The COVID Relief Bill was signed into law on Dec. 27, 2020 to provide a range of ways our food system will be supported in 2021. The City and County will be able to benefit from many of these programs, which include:

- 15% increase in SNAP benefits for 6 months, starting in January through June 30, 2021
- Exclusion of unemployment compensation in calculating SNAP eligibility and benefits
- Increased access for college students to SNAP
- Additional funding for adding SNAP online retailers
- Extra \$400M nationally for the Emergency Feeding Assistance Program with up to 20% for distribution expenses
- \$175M nationally for nutrition services for seniors
- Expanded P-EBT to allow children under 6 enrolled in childcare to be considered
- \$1.5B nationally to fund food for distribution to those in need, and mandatory review of USDA distribution of food and assistance to farmers, farmers markets, etc.
- \$75M nationally for SNAP incentive programs

Considering data from 2-1-1, surveys, organizations providing food to the community, and resource availability, the Community Engagement and Health Equity Division of UT Dell Medical School developed the following recommendations for the Food Access Task Force to consider:

- 78754 (Dessau Rd/E Walnut Creek) and 78747 (Creedmoor) have a high volume of food need calls to 2-1-1, and no food pantries. Food distributions were comparatively low in these zip codes, reinforcing the need for more food access resources.
- 78741 (E Riverside/Montopolis) had a high volume of food need calls to 2-1-1, but not many resources compared to other high call volume areas, highlighting the need to increase the number of food access resources available in this area.
- 78728 (Wells Branch) had many households and individuals receiving distributions, but no food pantries serving the community (the closest is 3 miles away). This may be an area that needs a fixed resource where community members can receive food regularly.
- Additional tailored service options are needed for pregnant women and families with young children, immigrants, large families (4 or more), people of color, COVID+ individuals and those in quarantine. Often those experiencing food needs have other co-occurring needs that should be addressed simultaneously, such as rental, mortgage, and utility assistance. City relief programs should take these needs into consideration when addressing food access as we move into recovery.

Appendix A

Funding Summary of COVID-19 Food Access Programs

Organization/Program	Source	FY 20 Funding	FY 21 Funding
Central Texas Food Bank	RISE	\$2,000,000	
Central Texas Food Bank (Food Distribution)	APH	\$240,123	\$240,123
Central Texas Food Bank (Food Pantry- Neighborhood Centers)	APH	\$13,000	\$13,000
Central Texas Food Bank	Travis County	\$618,000	\$118,000
Meals on Wheels and More	RISE	\$250,000	
Meals on Wheels and More (Meals on Meals /Health Equity Meals on Wheels)	APH	\$535,129	\$535,129
Revolution Foods – Homeless Meals	APH	\$460,000	
Good Work Austin - Homeless Meals	APH	\$151,008	\$320,000
Various vendors (GWA, Levy, Jason's Deli, ezCater) - IsoFac and Pro Lodge Meals	EOC Logistics	\$1,530,000	
Sysco Foods - Homeless Meals / Shelf-Stable	APH	\$741,837	\$765,000
Sustainable Food Center -Neighborhood Pop-up Grocery	APH	\$112,541	
Sustainable Food Center -Double Dollar Expansion	APH	\$77,003	\$77,003
Sustainable Food Center: Grow Local	Travis County	\$56,000	\$56,000
The Cook's Nook - Del Valle Caregiver Meals*	APH	\$700,000	

Austin Ed Fund - AISD Caregiver Meals*	APH	\$2,470,000	\$5,400,000
Manor ISD Caregiver Meals People for Change	APH	\$20,000	
Mobile food, health and wellness and financial literacy resources Program	APH		\$400,000
Office of Sustainability Funds (Support for Drive-A-Senior West, Farmshare Austin, Urban Roots, and Keep Austin Fed)	Office of Sustainability	\$20,000	
Good Apple	ATD/Office of Sustainability	\$40,000	
Keep Austin Together/SEFAN program	Travis County	\$1,018,400	\$1,500,000
The Cook's Nook: ISD Caregiver Meals program	Travis County		\$1,105,000

Appendix B

Food Access Flyer in English and Spanish

Are you struggling to meet basic needs during COVID-19?



Get help with food, housing, transportation and more by calling 2-1-1 or visiting connectatx.org.



Need Food Now?
For a map of food resources near you, scan the QR code with your smartphone camera.



  

¿Se le está haciendo difícil satisfacer sus necesidades básicas durante la pandemia de COVID-19?



Obtenga ayuda con alimentos, vivienda, transporte y más llamando al 2-1-1 o visitando connectatx.org.



¿Necesita comida ahora?
Para obtener un mapa de los recursos alimentarios cerca de usted, escanee el código QR con la cámara de su teléfono.



  

Appendix C

Food Need Calls to 2-1-1

Food Need 2-1-1 Calls within Travis County

