

2020



Lehigh Valley Food Providers Guidance During a Pandemic



LEHIGH VALLEY
FOOD POLICY
COUNCIL



Introduction

The first case of COVID-19 in the United States was confirmed on January 21, 2020 in the state of Washington. Less than 3 months later the first case was confirmed in the Lehigh Valley, the same day the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic. On March 13th the President of the United States issued a proclamation declaring a National State of Emergency concerning COVID-19.

During the early days of the pandemic ‘flattening the curve’ became the mantra of the federal and state governments. Statewide efforts began with the governor of California issuing a stay-at-home order on March 19th, allowing residents to leave home only to shop for essential needs or to go to jobs identified as essential. Pennsylvania stay-at-home orders followed on April 1st, two weeks after Governor Wolf instituted several mitigation efforts including K-12 school closures, the closure of dine-in facilities at restaurants and bars, and the restriction of visitors at nursing homes, assisted living facilities, personal care homes, and correctional facilities. Grocery stores and pharmacies were permitted to stay open as they were seen as providing essential services.

On March 25, 2020 Governor Wolf, in effort to lessen the threat of food insecurity resulting from the pandemic, submitted a request to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) for the following:

- Approval of Pennsylvania's application for Disaster Household Distribution to ensure that Pennsylvania's food banks and food assistance networks can distribute foods in their warehouses to those in need without needing to verify eligibility;
- Waive eligibility requirements for The Emergency Food Assistance Program enabling food banks to distribute food quickly without the burden and delay of completing paperwork;
- Waivers to permit foods at schools and state warehouses intended for the National School Lunch Program to be used to provide meals for families outside of congregate feeding sites;
- Flexibility to adapt the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program to better meet the needs of eligible households;
- Expand the availability of the SNAP Online Purchasing program.

This request, and subsequent approvals, enabled emergency food operations and other food providers to remain open and expand service eligibility if in compliance with social distancing and personal protective equipment use procedures.

Confusing and inconsistent safety guidance communications from the federal and state governments resulted in non-profit meal providers, farmers, and farmers' markets unsure of how to safely continue providing access to food, especially for vulnerable, food insecure populations. The Lehigh Valley Food Policy Council, witnessing this confusion and the challenges non-profit organizations were facing, and learning of the solutions being implemented, decided to gather information that could be shared with all non-profits and food providers in preparation for the next surge of the pandemic.

Key findings from a six-question online survey sent to members of the Lehigh Valley Food Policy Council, food pantries and meal service providers are included in this guidance document. The survey was designed to gather information about how the pandemic impacted the operations of these organizations and the food access services they provide, including strategies used to continue food distribution in the Lehigh Valley. In addition, barriers to maintaining services and responding to increased demand were identified. Most survey questions were open-ended in order not to restrict answers to predetermined barriers or solutions.

Thirty-four organizations responded to the survey: twenty-eight operate food pantries, seven provide meals to seniors and four provide meals to people of low income. In addition to direct food service providers, six farmers' markets, four farmers, and four organizations that work on food policy shared information on the survey. Note that several responding organizations provide more than one type of service such as a food pantry and a meal site.

This guidance document shares information about the challenges organizations faced at the beginning of the pandemic, and the strategies used to overcome these challenges that enabled services and operations to continue.



Challenges experienced at the beginning of the pandemic

Challenges

- Fewer volunteers available to work in emergency food services
- Sanitizing supplies difficult to find
- Personal protective equipment (PPE), including masks, gloves, and hand sanitizers difficult to obtain
- Limited refrigeration or freezer space
- Inability to provide meals in a congregate setting
- Limited transportation, especially for seniors, due to lack of volunteer drivers and changes in meal delivery strategies
- Consumers unwilling to adhere to mitigation procedures
- Disruptions in food supply chains
- Lack of a universal online system for ordering from local farmers
- Disruptions in local meat processing, e.g., butchering, processing, packaging



Why challenges occurred

- Lack of coordination and communication regarding changes in operations
- Inability to access information needed to find cleaning supplies, PPE, and volunteers.
- Lack of consistent messages
- Limited availability of PPE and sanitizing supplies
- Difficulties in providing information to individuals and families who obtain food from pantries or meal sites
- Lack of coordination among food pantries, farmers, farmers' markets



Overcoming the Challenges

In effort to continue providing access to food for people in need during the pandemic, non-profits, farmers, and farmers markets made significant changes in their operations. Most were able to make these changes without having to suspend services. However, a few needed to cease operations while making accommodations to be in compliance with the region's mitigation requirements.

Following are recommended strategies that resulted from the experiences of organizations early in the pandemic:

Keeping current with mitigation mandates:

- Periodically check the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#) website
- Periodically check the [Pennsylvania Department of Health \(PADOH\)](#) website
- Periodically check with the [Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture](#) website

Advice for service changes and specific populations:

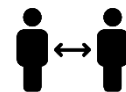
- Periodically check with the [Pennsylvania Department of Aging](#) website
- Periodically check with the [Pennsylvania Department of Human Services](#) website

Adhering to social distancing requirements:

- Provide 'grab and go' meals
- Limit number of people entering area to pick up food or meals
- Move services from indoors to outdoors
- Use floor decals and posters to remind staff, volunteers, and consumers to keep 6-feet apart
- Stagger shifts and permit remote working to reduce the number of people onsite at any one time
- Adjust service hours to accommodate reductions in staffing and volunteers
- Established drive-by donation drop-off sites



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Finding volunteers:

- Contact the [Volunteer Center of the Lehigh Valley](#)
- Contact PA 211 for maps of volunteer agencies/opportunities
- Reach out to local colleges and high schools
- Local Red Cross, Peter Brown, peter.brown@redcross.org
- Utilize social media, e.g., Next Door and Face Book



Emergency volunteers

- Southern Baptist Relief Corps, In PA, requests may be sent to sbdrpj.recov@gmail.com. Requests must include:
 - ✓ Client's full name, contact information, and full address
 - ✓ What services (meal prep and/or delivery, Rx delivery, grocery delivery) are required
 - ✓ When services are needed (start date, how many times of day, and duration in days or weeks).
- Contact SEPA-VOAD, Julia Menzo, JMenzo@libertylutheran.org

Adhering to safety requirements:

- Establish written safety protocols describing mitigation procedures and requirements
- Require staff, volunteers, and consumers to wear face masks
- Provide face masks for those who do not have them
- Place portable handwashing stations at service locations
- Provide sanitizer for staff, volunteers, and consumers
- Provide disposable gloves for staff and volunteers

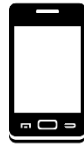


Requests for PPE:

- PPE/Cleaning Supply requests can be made through your local VOAD contact and will go to state VOAD. Local VOAD contacts are:
 - Lehigh County – Tanya Hook: tanyahook@lehighcounty.org.
 - Northampton County – Thomas Guth: tguth@ncem-pa.org
- Organizations utilize the United Way Face Book group Nonprofit Agencies COVID-19 Group

Improving communication:

- Keep organizations' websites up to date with information about service hours and safety requirements
- Share information about service hours with other organizations that are known as resources for the community such as:
 - [Buy Fresh Buy Local of the Greater Lehigh Valley](#)
 - [United Way of the Greater Lehigh Valley](#)
 - [Lehigh Valley Food Policy Council](#)
- Utilize shareable social media graphics and guidance from BFBL, CDC, PADOH in communications to the community



Created by Anutha Narvekar from Nour Project

Improving the local food supply chain:

- Establish a community distribution site for locally grown food
- Coordinate efforts among local farmers and value-added producers to establish new markets and buyers
- Work with the Lehigh Valley Food Policy Council and Penn State Extension to collaborate and coordinate with local farmers and distribution sites



Created by AmOlkey from Nour Project

The Lehigh Valley Food Policy Council hopes this document is helpful to those who seek to continue offering healthy foods to those in need during public health crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. We thank all of the individuals and agencies who shared their challenges and solutions so that we can be better prepared for future infectious disease outbreaks that call for restrictive mitigation efforts.

This guidance document will be updated as new information is obtained that is beneficial for the continuation of services and food distribution in our region. Any suggestions you may have can be shared with Cathy Coyne, LV Food Policy Council member, at coynecaa@gmail.com or Susan Dalandan, LVFPC Coordinator, at sdalandan@lvfpc.org.

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