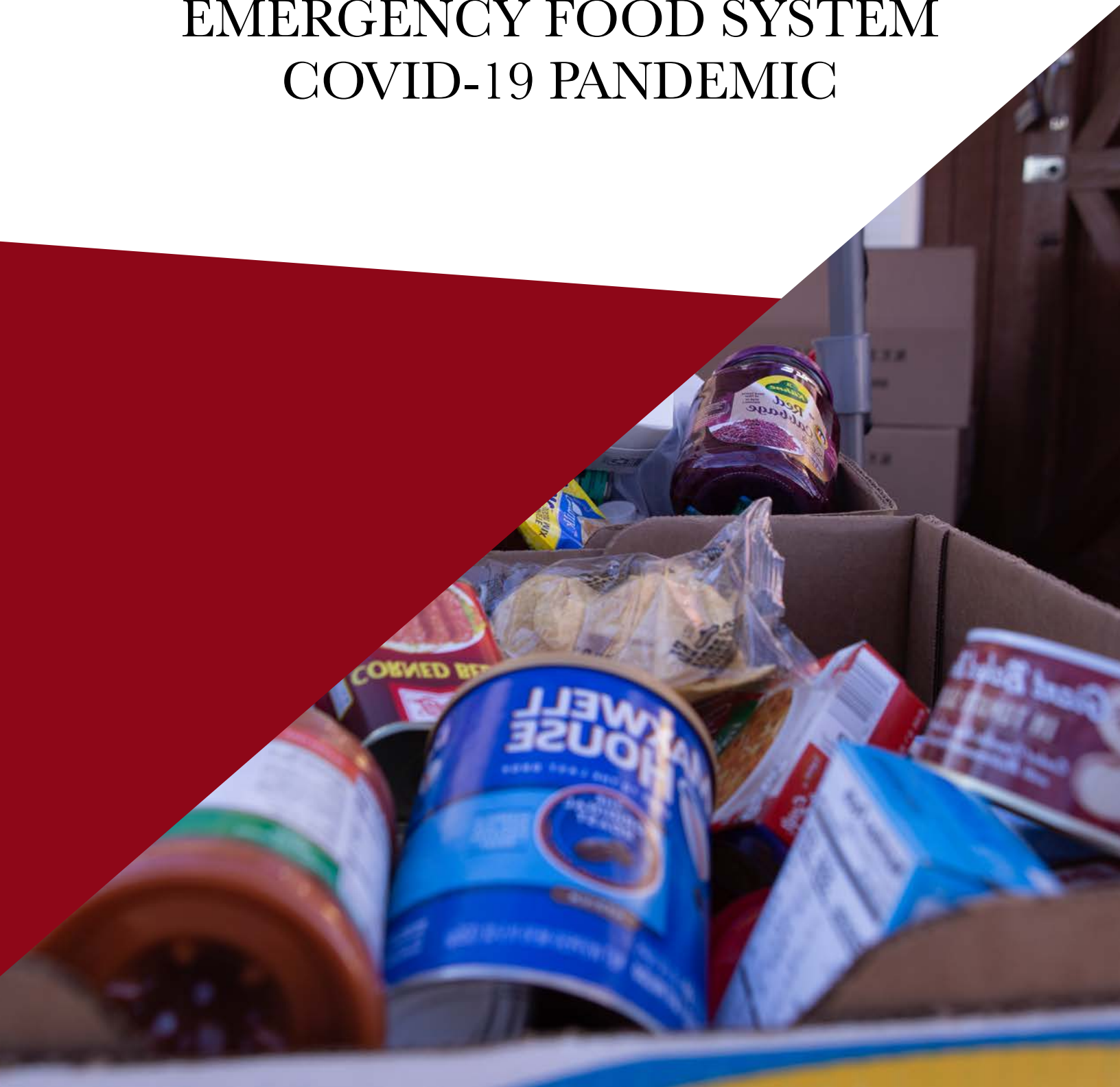


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RUTGERS

Edward J. Bloustein School
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RALPH W. VOORHEES CENTER
FOR CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

MIDDLESEX COUNTY EMERGENCY FOOD SYSTEM COVID-19 PANDEMIC



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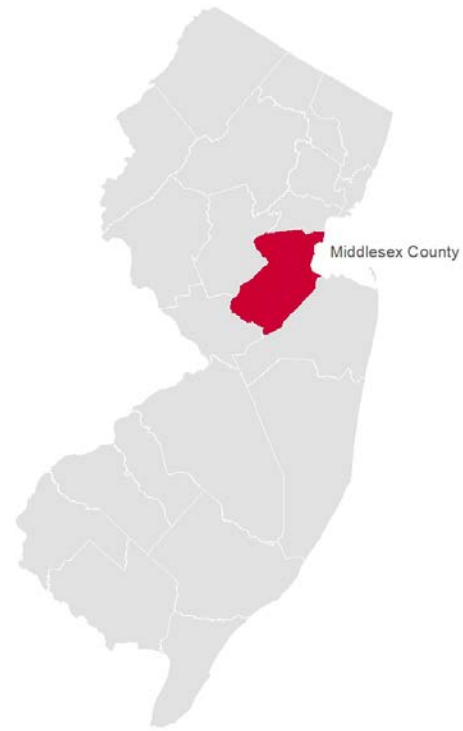
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INTRODUCTION



INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic placed enormous stress on the emergency food system through expanded demand and unusual supply challenges. With concern growing about community spread of the Coronavirus in mid-March 2020, New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy issued Executive Order No. 104 which limited in-person gatherings, shifted K-12 schools and higher education from in-person to remote education, paused in-person restaurant seating, and limited non-essential retail.¹ Unemployment in Middlesex County surged from 3% in 2019 to an estimated 14% in April 2020; the estimated rate remained above 10% through August before declining to an estimated 6% in September 2020 (NJ Department of Labor, 2020). During this period, Middlesex County ranked second among New Jersey counties with the highest estimated change in the number of food insecure residents and the Community FoodBank of New Jersey estimated that nearly 100,000 Middlesex County residents would experience food insecurity in 2020 (Community FoodBank of New Jersey, 2020).



Map 1. Location of Middlesex County in New Jersey

The Coronavirus crisis produced seismic quakes in the emergency food system, driving both a surge of people seeking food and donations of food, non-food goods, and money when schools and businesses closed suddenly and people donated generously. MCFOODS, the Middlesex County food bank, experienced a nearly 200% increase in the amount of food it received and distributed in 2020 compared with 2019 and a 66% increase in the number of food pantries that accessed its services. Middlesex County saw a 15% increase in the number of households and persons using SNAP benefits in October 2020 compared with October 2019 (Johnson, 2020).

¹ NJ Executive Order 104 <https://nj.gov/infobank/eo/056murphy/pdf/EO-104.pdf>



THE PROJECT

In partnership with MCFOODS and the Metuchen Edison Assistance League (MEAL), a coalition of emergency food providers, we sought to better understand how the emergency food system experienced the pandemic in Middlesex County (Map 1). The partners asked us to explore how demand and supply changed and to identify the challenges that the system faced and how it responded. The partners were especially interested to learn about challenges related to their relationships with pantry guests, aggregating and distributing food, volunteers, and Covid-19 safety. The partners also wondered whether pantries innovated in ways that could be useful to their peers during the remainder of the pandemic and after.

We crafted a set of research questions with MCFOODS and MEAL, identified pantries to interview, organized focus groups, and observed a set of meetings. We conducted 14 interviews with food pantries from September through November 2020, 12 over Zoom and two via email. About half of these pantries are part of MEAL and about half are in the MCFOODS network and are located in Middlesex County, most outside of Metuchen and Edison (Map 2). To identify food pantries

to interview, we gathered emergency food organization lists from MCFOODS and MEAL, contacted each pantry, and invited them to participate in a conversational non-confidential interview on Zoom. We also interviewed Jennifer Apostol, Director of MCFOODS, in early November 2020 to better understand pandemic challenges from the perspective of the county food bank. We observed a MEAL network meeting on July 10, 2020, hosted a pantry focus group on October 2, 2020 with MEAL, held a small meeting with Aldersgate pantry staff on October 19, 2020, observed a St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church pantry staff meeting, and observed a MEAL pantry Network meeting on October 30, 2020, all on Zoom. The pantries we interviewed and or observed include large and small organizations, some with paid staff and some run by volunteers. Some are located within municipal governments; most are voluntary efforts associated with nonprofit, often religious organizations (Table 1). Lastly, we accessed 2019 990 tax forms from CFBNJ. This allowed us to identify which pantries worked with it in 2018 and the dollar amount of goods each received. Unfortunately, comparable data for 2019 and 2020 will not be available for some time.

Map 2. Map of Emergency Food Providers Interviewed

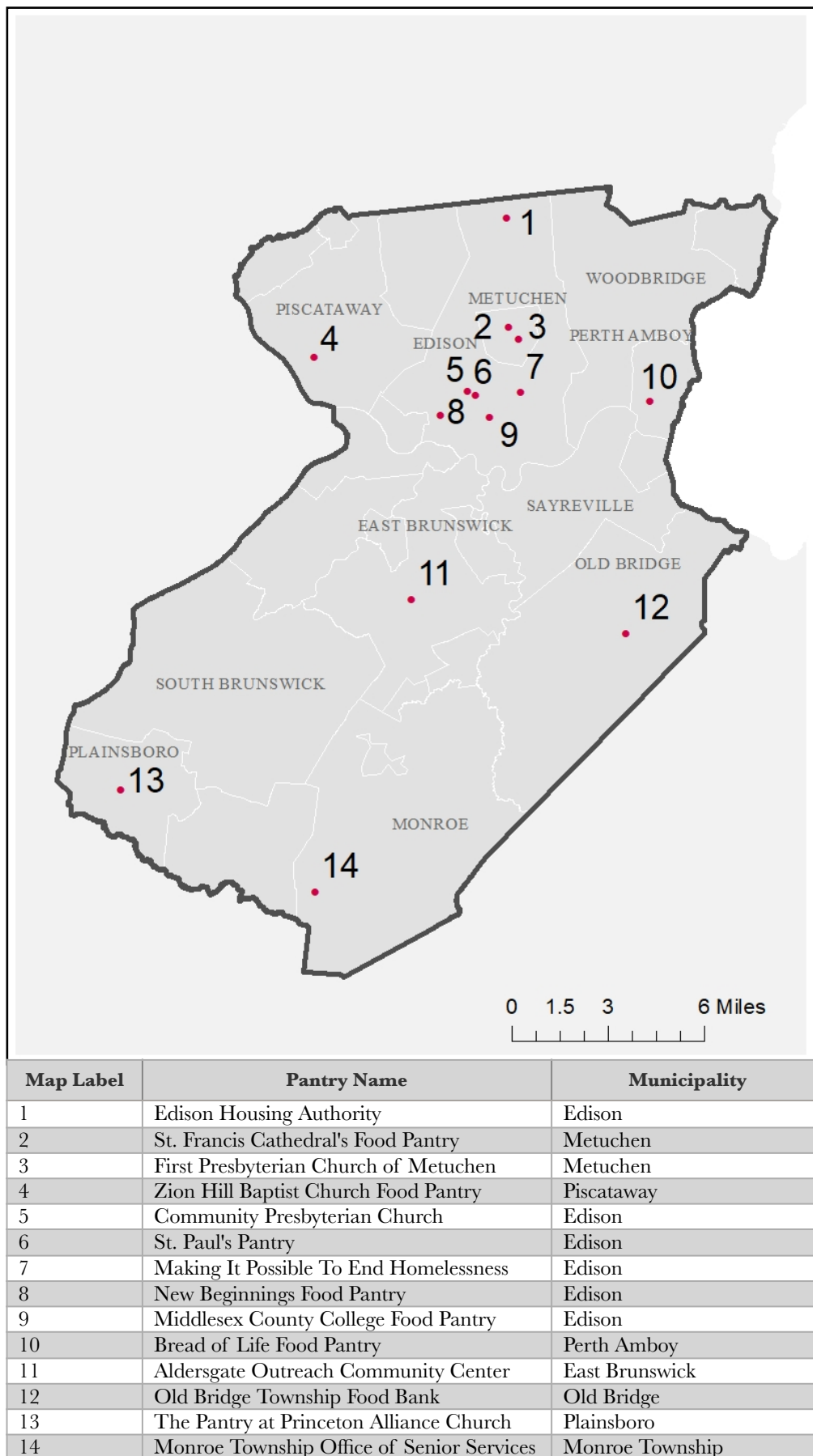


Table 1. Emergency Food Providers that Participated in the Study

Interview	Focus Group	MEAL Meeting	Food Pantry	Municipality	CFBNJ *2019	MCFOODS	MEAL
X	X		Aldersgate Outreach Community Center	E Brunswick	\$41,924	X	
By email		X	Community Presbyterian Church	Edison		X	X
By email	X		Edison Housing Authority	Edison		X	X
X	X	X	First Presbyterian Church of Metuchen	Metuchen		X	X
X	X	X	MiPH - Amandla Crossing and Imani Park	Edison		X	X
X	X	X	Middlesex County College	Edison		X	X
X			Monroe Township Senior Services	Monroe Township		X	
X			New Beginnings Church of the Nazarene	Edison	\$9,682	X	X
X			Old Bridge Township Food Bank	Old Bridge		X	
X			Bread of Life Food Pantry	Perth Amboy	\$28,322	X	
X			St Francis Cathedral	Metuchen		X	
X	X	X	St. Paul's Lutheran Church	Edison		X	X
X			The Pantry at Princeton Alliance Church	Plainsboro		X	
X			Zion Hill Baptist Church	Piscataway	\$57,906	X	

*Community FoodBank of New Jersey 990 tax forms

The report provides an overview of the emergency food system in Middlesex County, a brief overview of the two regional food banks with a focus on MCFOODS, an introduction to food pantry coalitions, and a discussion about how food pantries experienced changing demand during the pandemic and how they aggregated, stored, and distributed food, worked with volunteers,

and addressed non-food concerns through Fall 2020.

The report includes a set of concerns that pantries raised about the future and ideas that emerged in our discussions with them. We conclude with summaries of the pantries we interviewed to highlight their experiences in their voices.

THE EMERGENCY FOOD SYSTEM



THE EMERGENCY FOOD SYSTEM

The emergency food assistance system is an institutionalized public private system of governmental and nongovernmental actors, for- and non-profit, corporations and thousands of volunteers that aggregate, organize and store, and distribute food and other items such as personal hygiene, diapers, clothing, laundry and cleaning supplies. This system has grown exponentially since the 1970s as the US has dismantled and decentralized the welfare state, wages for

many low income workers have stagnated or declined, and housing costs have soared. As often the first point of entry to the increasingly public private hybrid social welfare system, food pantries often distribute information about social service programs and sometimes provide direct assistance (Rosenthal and Newman, 2019). During the pandemic, pantries found themselves increasingly in this first point of contact role as households who knew nothing about the social welfare system reached out for food and so much more with many desperately looking for housing assistance. Next we discuss the main federal and state food programs, the two



Image 1. Food staging areas at “The Pantry” at Princeton Alliance Church

main food banks that work with pantries in Middlesex County, and how a set of food pantries experienced the pandemic.



GOVERNMENTAL PROGRAMS²

Federal and state governments fund programs that divert surplus agricultural products into the emergency food system. The federal government supports The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) and the state of New Jersey supports the State Food Purchase Program (SFPP). In the Spring of 2020, the federal government expanded funding and waived some requirements (Cuite et al., 2020). The March 2020 Families First Coronavirus Act provided \$400 million for food banks; New Jersey food banks received \$20 million (Office of the Governor, 2020 July 9). The federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act provided an additional \$200 million dollars for TEFAP and increased assistance for SNAP (Tisch Center for Food Education and Policy, 2020). The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) launched the Farmers to Families Food Box Program in April 2020.

It enabled food distributors to create family sized fresh food boxes with produce, meat, and dairy items that they delivered to local food distribution organizations (USDA, 2020). County and municipal governments have become increasingly involved, with some, like Middlesex County, hosting food banks and others, like Monroe and Old Bridge Townships, hosting food pantries. During the pandemic, municipal governments provided additional support to gather large quantities of food and donations.

REGIONAL FOOD BANKS



Middlesex County food pantries work with two regional food banks - MCFOODS, the Middlesex County food bank, and the Community FoodBank of New Jersey (CFBNJ), a large regional food bank in Hillside, NJ. The regional food banks are critical partners in aggregating and distributing food and other products, distributing information about social service programs including SNAP, and supporting local food distribution partners like food pantries and emergency food coalitions.

²Federal food program waivers: <https://hungerfreenj.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/ChildNutritionWaiversSummary-1.pdf>

Community FoodBank of New Jersey

The Community FoodBank of NJ (CFBNJ) is a large regional food bank that implements the federal TEFAP and NJ state feeding programs and aggregates fresh, frozen, and nonperishable food and non-food items such as household and personal care supplies, diapers, holiday gifts, and school supplies which it distributes to local food distribution organizations including food pantries. CFBNJ provides training and partner organizations can access Oasis Insight software, a cloud based system that allows pantries to manage inventory and client intake. Some local food distribution partners access federal and state food programs while others use other CFBNJ programming such as discount ordering through Agency Express. CFBNJ delivers to some partners and waived delivery fees during the pandemic.

MCFOODS

Middlesex County Food Organization and Outreach Distribution (MCFOODS), administered by the Middlesex County Department of Community Services, is Middlesex County's food bank. It aggregates food and non-food items and distributes them to dozens of local food organizations in its network. It has grown dramatically over the past 25 years and now maintains 5,000 sq ft

of space with perishable and non-perishable storage and six staff members. The pandemic presented MCFOODS with an unprecedented set of challenges as staff responded to requests to donate, reformulated their processes to ensure they were Covid-19 safe, added new food pantry partners, and provided goods to meet an unprecedented increase in demand. In the spring, MCFOODS expanded the days it was open to all weekdays, added a 54-foot refrigerated trailer to increase perishable storage, erected a tent, and moved its distribution operation outside, efforts the Middlesex County Improvement Authority supported with \$140,000 (J. Apostol, personal communication, 10/22/20).

Aggregation

Before the pandemic, MCFOODS collected 50 tons of food each year in their iconic green bins located in schools throughout Middlesex County. With schools closed, MCFOODS staff retrieved the bins and created new processes to collect food, including food drives in mall parking lots. Simultaneously, it handled a surge of food as businesses, schools, and distributors closed suddenly and donated what they had onsite. Some of this food, like school milk containers, was perishable, and some, like donations from restaurants and caterers, was packaged in restaurant-sized

portions. Food donations continued as food that had been ordered for now closed businesses and cancelled events continued to flow through supply chains. MCFOODS also receives regular food shipments from the CFBNJ, and Farmers Against Hunger, a NJ gleaning organization, provides weekly shipments of fresh produce. Starting in June 2020, MCFOODS received pallets of federal Farmers to Families Food Boxes with 35-40 pounds of produce, dairy, and meat. “Feeding Middlesex County,” MCFOODS’ nonprofit partner, received generous monetary donations between March and May of 2020. They had budgeted \$100,000 for MCFOODS and raised \$300,000 which enabled MCFOODS to buy items directly from suppliers including Wakefern, Cisco, and Performance Food Group, although it has been challenging to purchase nonperishable foods. MCFOODS also receives personal hygiene products, cleaning supplies, and diapers and, during the pandemic, it received lots of toilet paper (J. Apostol, personal communication, 10/22/20).

Distribution

MCFOODS transformed its distribution system to meet pandemic needs. It increased the number of days it opens and is now open five days a week, and it organizes different distribution formats each day. On Tuesdays, it

distributes similar packs of goods to each pantry, and pantries can take what they need in any amount from a selection area. On Wednesdays, CFBNJ delivers a truckload of goods that includes frozen and dairy products; pantries can take excess items. Pantries can choose from miscellaneous items such as: corn, soda, juice, water, cereal, pudding, canned meats, canned goods, tuna, peanut butter, juices, bottled water, coffee, snacks, and household and personal products such as cleaners, wipes, baby diapers. MCFOODS receives bread on other days. Distributing food is challenging. Food is bulky and heavy and many pantry volunteers and staff pick up food in their own cars and SUVs. For example, the Farmers to Families Food Boxes are challenging to move because of their size and shorter shelf life. On a few occasions, MCFOODS delivered pallets of boxes to pantries, but few, if any, have space to store them which means they have to distribute them immediately. MCFOODS also worked with the Middlesex County Board of Social Services to ensure that people who are homeless and living in hotels receive food that requires little preparation (J. Apostol, personal communication, 10/22/20).

Building Emergency Food System Capacity

MCFOODS is integral to building emergency food system capacity. First, pantries network with one another during their food pick-ups at MCFOODS which is essential as pantries depend on one another for support, to share foods when they have too much or too little, and to mentor new pantries and each other. One pantry director explained: “On Wednesdays at MCFOODS, when they have a distribution, a lot of the pantries are there at the same time. It gives us a chance to visit around and get to know each other.” Second, MCFOODS sends emails regularly so that pantries know what food they can pick up each day. MCFOODS also shares information about other programs and services such as housing, mental health, and transportation services. Third, MCFOODS linked food pantries with the LogistiCare service (NJ contracted with LogistiCare in May 2020) that pantries use to deliver food directly to people’s homes. Fourth, MCFOODS supports local emergency food coalitions like MEAL (J. Apostol, personal communication, 10/22/20).

The Future

The staff at MCFOODS worked through an enormous and ongoing set of challenges, and

foresee more. The need for their system capacity building remains, and pantries are increasingly looking for coordinated information about non-food services. Pantries want to know how best to link people, especially those who are homeless, to service infrastructures. They want to work better together so that they can more effectively direct pantry guests to pantries that provide certain goods and to staff or volunteers with expertise about different programs. Transportation is an ongoing challenge for pantry volunteers and staff who struggle to pick up large volumes of heavy food and goods in their own cars while also running the pantries and delivering food to people who may be unable to visit the pantry or carry food home (J. Apostol, personal communication, 10/22/20).

Local Emergency Food Coalitions

Five local coalitions of emergency food organizations operate in Middlesex County. Each brings organizations together to share information, help build capacity, provide peer support, identify and address challenges and opportunities, set norms and expectations, and organize food aggregation and distribution.

- **MEAL**, the Metuchen Edison Assistance League is a coalition of 13 pantry organizations which support their individual and collective efforts.
- **WE CARE** joins five Perth Amboy pantries³ that work together to understand community and pantry needs. They operate the WE CARE card which residents can use at two WE CARE pantries each month. During the pandemic, WE CARE waived this limit.
- **Feeding New Brunswick Network** is a coalition of emergency food organizations and local government in New Brunswick that share information and work collaboratively.⁴
- **We Feed** has operated in Woodbridge since the early 1990s.⁵
- **College Pantry Facebook** enables college pantry directors to network.

³ WE CARE: Peter's Pantry at St. Peter's Episcopal Church, Mercy House, Salvation Army, Iglesia Ciudad de Refugio, and Our Lady of Fatima Bread of Life Food Pantry and a new pantry. <https://www.facebook.com/We-Care-Perth-Amboy-Coalition-of-Food-Pantries-383566775012738/>

⁴ FNBN: <https://www.feedingnewbrunswick.org/food-pantries>.

⁵ WE FEED: <https://www.twp.woodbridge.nj.us/253/We-Feed-Food-Drive>.

FOOD PANTRIES DURING THE PANDEMIC





FOOD PANTRIES DURING THE PANDEMIC

Since March 2020, Middlesex County's food pantries have struggled to organize pantry operations safely and to meet unprecedented food demand and supply in a challenging and frequently changing environment. In this section, we discuss how demand, aggregation, and distribution changed during the pandemic, and spotlight how some pantries dealt with food demand and aggregation.



FOOD PANTRY DEMAND

Though no two pantries have experienced the pandemic in exactly the same way, demand at most food pantries increased especially during the initial lockdown (March through May) and in the fall as some unemployment benefits ended. The composition of pantry visitors also changed with an increase in the number of higher income households and people who had become homeless. Pantries explained the increases in a variety of ways. Some noticed a relationship to particular industries such as an increase of food service workers who struggled with job loss. Many noticed an increase in the number of children who visited. Some pantry staff explained that

households needed more food as children learned remotely and that some two-income households became one-income households during the pandemic as one parent stayed home to accommodate remote schooling. Though many pantries saw demand increase, some pantries observed that some regular clients stopped visiting, including those who feared illness. Some pantries responded by offering delivery. Edison Housing Authority's food pantry, created in 2019 during the federal government shutdown, serves about 80 families a month at two housing sites, one in North Edison at Robert Holmes Garden with about 50 families, and one in South Edison at Julius Engel Apartments with about 20-25 families. Between March and mid-Fall 2020, the pantry saw at least a 50% increase in demand from Edison Housing Authority residents and people from surrounding towns including Plainfield and Elizabeth.

“The food we get, within two weeks, everything is gone. We restock. Before the pandemic, we had to rotate everything. Now there's nothing to rotate because food goes quickly.”
- Zion Hill Baptist Church

Zion Hill Baptist Church's pantry saw 75-100 families each week during the pandemic compared with 50 before it. The pantry gradually increased the amount of food it

SPOTLIGHT: ST. PAUL'S LUTHERAN CHURCH FOOD PANTRY

St. Paul's Lutheran Church food pantry served more than twice the number of people in 2020 compared with 2019 (339 people in 2020 compared with 156 people in 2019 when it distributed about 70,000 pounds of food). Before the pandemic most pantry visitors received social security or disability assistance, lived nearby, and had low incomes. They walked, rode bikes, or drove inexpensive cars to the pantry. During the pandemic, pantry staff and volunteers noticed a shift. New people who visit the pantry dress differently and drive more expensive cars, and the pantry saw more people from outside of Edison. The majority of St. Paul's pantry guests are from Middlesex County (65%) with 40% from Edison (compared with 60% in 2019) and slightly more than a quarter (28%) from Union County. In 2020, outside of Edison, the pantry saw 59 people from Plainfield, 34 from Perth Amboy, and 22 from Elizabeth. In October, they noticed increased demand from people who are homeless.



Image 2. Shelves stocked with food

prepared as the number of families increased week-to-week. They served more families with school-aged children, younger people, and families who live in hotels.

The Old Bridge Township food pantry served more than 170 Old Bridge households per month during the pandemic up from 130-140 before it. Demand increased from late April to June and from late September to October. They attribute the increase to the result of the

end of unemployment benefits; families who lost an income as one parent stayed home to assist with remote learning; a need for more food as children remain at home to learn remotely, and an increase in unemployed restaurant workers.

The First Presbyterian Church of Metuchen served 60-80 clients per week before the pandemic and approximately 400 families per month during it. Some of the increase may be

related to the pantry's expansion of delivery services which doubled to 20 deliveries every week (80 per month). The pantry delivers to another 46 families in Imani Park (housing with support service geared towards the needs of homeless individuals and families), Amandla Crossing (transitional housing program for homeless single parent families with public assistance), and the Mission First Housing project (which develops and manages affordable, safe and sustainable homes for people in need). Fifty-to-sixty clients pick up food at the pantry and the pantry makes lunches for children at local high schools. The increase in people who were unfamiliar with using food pantries increased the demands on food pantry staff and volunteers who spent more time explaining processes and procedures and creating new ones to make it easier for people who were unfamiliar with the pantries to use them. Trying to provide comfort in a context that necessitated social distancing took an emotional toll as pantry workers found it challenging to comfort and support people with the realities necessitated by Covid-19 safety protocols, such as social distancing. In addition to explaining to first-time users how the food pantry system worked, the pandemic also brought people who were unfamiliar with the social welfare systems. The food pantries became their first point of access and food pantry staff found themselves confronted with

requests for assistance to access support for utilities, rent, healthcare, and emergency housing in addition to increased demand for food and non-food products such as clothing, diapers, wipes, personal hygiene products, laundry detergent, and toiletries. Pantries are trying to increase their capacity to provide referrals, and, in some cases, direct assistance. First Presbyterian Church of Metuchen has provided assistance to homeless individuals by providing them shelter temporarily in motels while accessing 211 for services. MCFOODS and CFBNJ provide information about social service programs and MCFOODS regularly sends emails and flyers with services which pantries print and insert into bags, like the Old Bridge Township food bank. A few pantries, such as Zion Hill Baptist Church, provide information tables with social service, housing, and health information for pantry guests. Given that the emergency food system saw so many people who had not previously used it, this was especially helpful since many people are unfamiliar with these services and programs. Some pantries provide support with SNAP benefits to ensure that pantry visitors access the governmental resources that are available to them. SNAP benefits enable them to shop in grocery stores and online to purchase what they want.

Some pantries are housed within larger organizations that provide emergency rental

assistance. The pantry in Old Bridge worked with PSE&G to provide utility assistance. Some pantries that are organized in or in partnership with government agencies linked pantry guests to social workers. Pantries noted that different types of households need different forms of assistance. Monroe Township Senior Services works with many older adults who need assistance with utilities, aids to help them, food and prescription delivery, and help with referrals and applications for Meals On Wheels and Magic Kitchen, which provides prepared meals.⁶ We turn now to food pantry aggregation practices.



FOOD AGGREGATION PRACTICES

Pantries aggregate food and non-food items from a variety of sources including the CFBNJ and MCFOODS food banks; federal (TEFAP) and state (SFPP) food programs; stores including Starbucks, Wawa, Panera, WholeFoods and Costco; drives and direct food, non-food, and monetary donations, and they purchase food from grocery stores, caterers, and through CFBNJ's Agency Express program. Many of these aggregation pathways changed during the pandemic.

SPOTLIGHT: ALDERSGATE FOOD PANTRY

Aldersgate Food Pantry aggregates food from a variety of sources. Before the pandemic, it received most of its food from CFBNJ which delivers monthly and provides access to the Oasis Insight software system for record keeping and reporting. Aldersgate participates in federal and state food programs and purchases through Agency Express which has been more challenging during the pandemic due to reduced supply. Though Aldersgate receives shipments from CFBNJ, its staff often visit CFBNJ between deliveries to pick items as they are available. Since the pandemic, it has increased the amount of food it receives from other sources. The pantry visits MCFOODS twice a week and it received federal fresh food boxes with 8 different kinds of fruits and vegetables and cases with half gallons of milk which they broke down to let people choose the foods they wanted. It purchases food retail from grocery stores such as Aldi and wholesale from The Food Architects caterer in Piscataway. ShopRite and Stop & Shop donate unsold food such as deli items, dented cans, cakes, vegetables, salad mixes, pastries, breads, and dairy which the pantry picks up twice a week. When the pantry ran short, it requested items through Facebook and held food drives and collected food in a town recreation center truck. To support the pantry, the town hosts drives for food, gift cards, and money.

⁶ More about Magic Kitchen is here: <https://aginginplace.org/magic-kitchen-meal-delivery-review/30>

Most pantries received more resources (food, money, non-food goods) than before the pandemic, but they also struggled to get specific things at different times. Pantries found a reduced list of items for purchase through CFBNJ's Agency Express system and relied more heavily on MCFOODS. Many pantries, especially the larger ones, gather food from a variety of places which requires considerable staff and or volunteer resources including vehicles and time. Before the pandemic, Zion Hill Baptist Church Food Pantry received food from a variety of sources including Stop 'N Shop, ShopRite grants (through CFBNJ for \$1,500-\$2,000 which let



Image 3. Fresh produce for clients at St. Paul's Food Pantry

pantries purchase foods from ShopRite), Panera (day old food), and Fish, Inc, a nonprofit in Dunellen, which shares items they receive from BJ's or Costco. During the pandemic, Zion leaned more on its religious community for support and people donated food, gift cards, and money. Zion's pantry is open once a week on Thursdays and one Tuesday a month to distribute food from CFBNJ. Members of the pantry aggregate food everyday which is difficult given the limited number of volunteers. Hours changed from 4-6 to the early afternoon because more people were at home. Each family receives five bags of food with nonperishable foods, produce, meat, frozen foods, orange juice, milk, eggs and other items if available. Milk, eggs, orange juice, and chicken are popular and people like produce and prefer items they know how to cook like potatoes rather than eggplant.

Pantries largely liked the USDA Farmers to Families Food Boxes that provided a steady flow of fresh produce and milk, even though they were challenging to pick up, store, and distribute. The Farmers to Families Food Boxes is part of the Coronavirus Food Assistance Program and the US Department of Agriculture distributed them through contracts with national, regional and local distributors (US Department of Agriculture, 2021). Food pantries we spoke with received

the boxes through MCFOODS, and through local distributors with whom they had established relationships. The boxes contained fresh produce, dairy products, seafood and meat. The US Department of Agriculture has distributed 132 million food boxes (US Department of Agriculture, 2021) and the program is currently in its fifth round. The food boxes were large (some almost 10lbs) which meant some pantries would distribute the boxes whole, while others would break them down and distribute the contents piecemeal. At Zion Hill, the pantry received produce boxes from MCFOODS and distributed some to households that could use

it and others they divided up. At Princeton Alliance Church, “The Pantry” complemented their other food aggregation efforts with federal Farmers to Families food boxes from the Princeton YMCA with yogurt, cottage cheese, hard-boiled eggs, and fresh produce from August-October 2020.

Some pantries experienced a reduction in food donations as food drives in schools and businesses did not take place. However, many pantries received an increase in monetary donations from their organizations and the community. Pantries routinely described people, especially at the start of the

SPOTLIGHT: OLD BRIDGE TOWNSHIP FOOD BANK

The Old Bridge Township food bank aggregates food and resources from a variety of sources. They receive financial support from the municipality, the federal Community Development Block Grant program, and the DuPont Corporation. They pick up from MCFOODS as needed, and public schools, clubs, and businesses run food drives, and people donate money. At the beginning of the pandemic, they received many food and monetary donations, but found it difficult to buy what they needed. They used to order food through ShopRite, but, during the pandemic, ordering was limited and they quickly realized that it was easier if people donated food rather than money. In mid-April, they added rolling donation bins for contactless food drop off and increased privacy by separating the people who receive food from those who donate it. The pantry quarantines food before sorting it. By August the pantry was able to purchase in bulk from ShopRite again. ShopRite also sometimes donates meat and chicken. The pantry purchases eggs and milk from Cream-O-Land and bread from ShopRite. In the summer they partnered with the local farmers association and the YMCA and received federal Farms to Families fresh food boxes from the Seashore Fruit and Produce Company. The boxes contained about 10 pounds of fruit and veggies and fed a family for two weeks.

SPOTLIGHT: FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF METUCHEN

At the First Presbyterian Church of Metuchen, before the pandemic, nearly a third of the pantry's food was fresh compared with about 5% during it. Before the pandemic, the pantry aggregated food from MCFOODS, their pantry garden, and food drives hosted by elementary schools, Rutgers, the YMCA, Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, and others. Whole Foods donated prepared foods. Once or twice a year they purchased food if they ran low. During the pandemic, the pantry found it more challenging to get food as food drives stopped, bread was in short supply, and they frequently ran out of food. Although they continued to pick up food at MCFOODS, it is hard to manage pantry operations and to travel frequently to get food.



Image 4. Food waiting to be picked up at First Presbyterian Church of Metuchen

pandemic, as generous. At the Monroe Township Senior Services Food Pantry, people were so generous that the pantry did not experience any shortages. They explained: "There was a man who came by and gave someone \$500, no questions asked. Another woman sends \$200 every month since the pandemic."

Monetary donations were less effective for some pantries, especially during the first few months of the pandemic. Grocery stores limited purchase of certain items and pantries did not want to clear grocery store shelves leaving little for others. Shopping at grocery stores meant that pantries paid retail prices and pantry dollars did not go as far as when

they made purchases through CFBNJ. Some pantries, like the Aldersgate Food Pantry, built relationships with caterers to access wholesale pricing. Given these challenges in spending money, some pantries preferred food donations. The Bread of Life Food Pantry at Our Lady of Fatima Church has preferred to receive food rather than money or volunteer time during the pandemic because it has been so hard to purchase food and to manage additional volunteers in the context of Covid-19 safety protocols. Other pantries struggled with donated food as they had to quarantine food donations and donated foods were often not what people needed. Some pantries avoided this by purchasing and

mailing gift cards to people which eliminated the need to visit the pantry and provided recipients with the flexibility to purchase what they needed. Most pantries also accept toiletries, hygiene products, cleaning supplies, laundry detergent, utensils, and can openers. Some pantries worked in partnership with groups that held drives to bring in these goods as well as food. New Beginnings Food Pantry distributes a combination of dry goods and fruit, vegetables, milk, eggs, frozen meals, and bread, chips or candy, and sometimes easy-to-bake foods. They distributed toilet paper during the pandemic because it was hard to find. The pantry had enough food during the pandemic, but needed hygiene products like lotion and toothpaste and laundry detergent. Middlesex County College accepts monetary and food donations and with toiletries, hygiene products, and diapers (typically from students, staff, and alumni), and maintains an Amazon wishlist. Diapers are its biggest non-food need. Before the pandemic, the pantry gathered food in bins around the campus. During the pandemic it purchased an outdoor donation bin for contactless donations on campus.

“The problem with us is the actual space to put items. We would love additional freezers. The space we have is not large enough.”
- Bread of Life Food Pantry

Even though most pantries had an increased volume of non-perishable and perishable goods during the pandemic, few struggled with non-perishable storage space. For example, with access restricted and fewer people in their buildings, the Edison Housing Authority stored food in an unused conference room and the Middlesex County College food pantry sorted food in an unused classroom. Even though many pantries had increased space for nonperishable products, a few were unable to accept as much fresh produce, meat, or dairy products as they wanted due to limited cold storage. Some pantries increased their refrigeration and freezer space during the pandemic but not all pantries were able to store everything they wanted. Zion Hill Baptist Church food pantry would like another freezer for frozen meat. Pantries wonder where they will store food as people reclaim classrooms, offices, and common spaces where pantries have been storing, sorting, and packing food. The increase in inventory has pantries to identify improved strategies to track inventories. Staff at “The Pantry” at Princeton Alliance Church are exploring a software program called “Smart Choice” which the Franklin Food Bank suggested. The software operates a remote ordering system so clients can create their own orders, and the pantry can track its inventory.

FOOD PANTRY DISTRIBUTION PRACTICES

During the pandemic, many pantries shifted their distribution processes. Some expanded the days and hours they were open and nearly all moved their distribution outside, created procedures to maintain social distancing, and required masks. Most pantries checked in visitors and some documented name, address, and household size to better know who they were serving, link visitors into other pantry programs, and distribute an appropriate amount of food. After check in, some pantries asked people to wait in socially distanced lines while others distributed numbers. Pantries increased signage and directions to keep processes flowing as they added new recipients throughout the pandemic.

Before the pandemic, many of Middlesex County's pantries enabled pantry visitors to choose all or some of the items they received. The pandemic made "choice" more difficult and many pantries switched to pre-packed food in bags or boxes. Some pantries provided pre-packed food bags or boxes and placed food on tables or in bins for participants to select, sometimes with the help of volunteers who would move the items to a bin to

maximize social distancing. Aldersgate Outreach Community Center operated a choice pantry before the pandemic and adopted a mixed approach during it. Three times a week, it arranged three to four canopies with tables outside where guests received pre-packed bags and select choice items. The pantry offered a choice element and used ropes to maintain social distancing. Aldersgate distributes federal and state food on different weeks. When pantry visitors arrive, usually by car, they show their ID to



Image 5. Yogurt and Milk for clients at Aldersgate Outreach Community Center

pantry staff who register their visit in OASIS in Spanish or English. Families receive a number and are called up to make their selections from tables and to receive pre-packed bags; volunteers place selections and bags in colored bins to ensure social distancing.

A few pantries maximized social distancing by placing pre-packed food directly in car trunks and offering to deliver it to those who walked. At First Presbyterian Church of Metuchen volunteers prepared two bags for each guest which they placed in a car trunk. Bags include cans of vegetables, beans, tuna, meat, spaghetti-o's, and tomato sauce, and soup, and "dried" soup (soup mix or ramen), milk, cereal, pasta, jelly, side dishes (eg. mashed potatoes), snacks (eg. animal crackers, potato chips), peanut butter, mac and cheese, applesauce, and sometimes drinks, hygiene products, diapers, or other goods. Middlesex Community College distributed grocery store gift cards over the summer when pantry visitors could not access the pantry. Donations for the pantry, through Middlesex County College's foundation, enabled the pantry to purchase the gift cards which were useful early in the pandemic when students could not travel to campus.

Before the pandemic, some pantries provided specialized bags for people who do not eat

"Families have been needing more help. Some people haven't gotten their jobs back. The unemployment helped in the beginning, and the extra money that was given out, but now that's gone so people need more help."

- Old Bridge Food Pantry

certain foods because of preference or diet-related health concerns. Specializing the content of pre-packed food bags became more challenging during the pandemic. Some pantries identified visitor preferences at check-in and modified bags by leaving out meat for vegetarians, for example. Some pantries created different sets of bags. Only a couple of pantries, like the Bread of Life Food Pantry at Our Lady of Fatima Church modified bags more substantially to address diet-related health concerns.

Pantries found that their modified distribution systems worked well, but they did identify some concerns. Pantries wondered how they would keep staff, visitors, and volunteers warm as the weather grew colder. Though some pantries developed drive-up systems that would keep guests warm, pantry staff and volunteers would need to be outside for long periods. A few pantries created appointment systems which enabled the staff to remain

inside, but these pantries tend to serve a smaller number of households per month. Old Bridge Township Food Pantry developed a plan to minimize how much time they spend outside that enables someone to drive up, call the pantry, and the pantry staff takes the bags outside. Adopting strict social distancing measures to keep everyone safe also meant that most staff and volunteers had little contact with pantry guests, and pantry staff and volunteers missed talking with clients, supporting them, and finding out what they needed. The distance was especially challenging given that many new people used the pantries.

Before the pandemic, few pantries delivered items, and, if they did, it was often in an emergency and only for a handful of households. During the pandemic, many pantries expanded delivery and they used a variety of approaches. Some used volunteers or staff and some used LogistiCare. LogistiCare, a national private transport company contracted by the State that provides transportation to non-emergency medical appointments shifted their focus when demand for transport to medical appointments declined, and began delivering emergency food to those in need. Pantries would contact LogistiCare to set up an appointment and provide them with a list of people who needed deliveries. LogistiCare

would then use their resources to complete those deliveries. For some pantries, like First Presbyterian Church of Metuchen, deliveries were usually done by a cab company that was subcontracted by LogistiCare. Some of the pantries were unaware of LogistiCare's delivery service, and others were unsure how the process worked.

VOLUNTEERS



Many food pantries are run by or with volunteers. Pantries engage volunteers to pick up food from food banks, stores, and other sources, to sort and package food, and to distribute it to pantry guests. This was especially challenging as many pantries saw a dramatic decline in the number of volunteers as many are older and more vulnerable to Covid-19. The loss of volunteers was a challenge, and many pantries had to limit the number of volunteers to ensure social distancing. In Old Bridge Township, during the first three to four months of the pandemic, the food pantry was run by the pantry manager and one other person and they worked from home. They sorted, packed, and brought bags where they needed to go for approximately 170 households per month. Pantries also organized volunteers who worked outside of the pantry framework. In Monroe Township, the Office of Senior

Services organized a home shopping program and solicited volunteers from the community to shop for residents who were part of the vulnerable population and more than 180 people signed up.

The lack of volunteers was especially a challenge as demand and pantry work increased. Pantries needed to aggregate and distribute more food which meant visiting food banks, grocery stores, and other sources more frequently. At Zion Hill Baptist Church, two to three volunteers pick up food every day from MCFOODS and someone staffs the pantry every day. Volunteers pick up items when they are delivered by CFBNJ and stock the pantry ensuring that everything goes on shelves or is refrigerated and nothing is on the floor. At Middlesex County College, at least 50 people volunteered before the pandemic to help the pantry shelve and unpack food and check-in pantry guests. During the pandemic, one staff member has been operating the pantry. She would like to add volunteers to help pack up the food, but few people are on campus. At other pantries, volunteers check-in pantry visitors and distribute bags and load cars. Some deliver to pantry clients.

At New Beginnings Food Pantry at New Beginnings Church of the Nazarene, most volunteers are members of the church and make food boxes for clients, organize and stock inventory, and help distribute food boxes to cars. Some of the volunteers can speak Spanish which helps communications with the wider community. Table 2 describes the various duties, issues and experiences of volunteers during the pandemic.



Image 6. A volunteer shows clients choice items at Aldersgate Outreach Community Center

Table 2. Pantry Volunteers and Duties

Name of Pantry	Number of Volunteers during Covid	Duties	Other
Aldersgate Outreach Community Center	6-8 including a Rutgers Intern	Volunteers pre-pack bags with nonperishable items and organize tables where pantry visitors shop for fruits, vegetables, cheese, and milk. A rope maintains social distancing.	Aldersgate closed the pantry for three days in March 2020 while staff figured out how to operate during the pandemic. They organized a core volunteer group to more easily track and control who was in the building in case of illness.
Bread of Life Food Pantry at Our Lady of Fatima Church	5-7	Volunteers help to drive, load, and unload the van and pack the bags.	Many volunteers are youth completing community service hours. The pantry often has more trouble finding volunteers over the summer and they found it challenging to find volunteers at the beginning of the pandemic. The Recreation Centre helped them find volunteers.
First Presbyterian Church of Metuchen	1 part-time paid staff member, 8-10 regular volunteers, and 5-6 who can be called for extra help.		Pre-pandemic, volunteers helped pantry visitors choose food. During the pandemic volunteers stock shelves, sort and pack food, and three volunteers load cars to minimize contact.
MiPH - Amandla Crossing and Amani Park			MIPH works with Volunteers of America to distribute food and needs more volunteers.
Middlesex County College	1 paid staff member	Pre-pandemic volunteers sort, organize, pack and distribute bags.	
New Beginnings Food Pantry at New Beginnings Church of the Nazarene		Make food boxes for clients, organize and stock inventory, and help distribute food boxes to cars.	Some volunteers can speak Spanish which helps communications with the community.
Old Bridge Township Food Pantry	2 plus additional help from municipal staff	Sort, pack, and bring bags where they need to go.	
The Pantry at Princeton Alliance Church	2-3 paid staff, and several volunteers	Organize, stock, sort, distribute, pack bags, take orders, and load food into cars	It is difficult to get volunteers during the day when many people are working
St. Paul's Pantry at St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Edison	33 people work there and about 15 are in the main rotation.	Shop, pick up food and deliver it to the pantry, sort and box and distribute it to clients.	Some pantry volunteers worked in the pantry alone; others worked from home.
Zion Hill Baptist Church	6	Pick up food, shop, organize, sort, and distribute food to clients	Two to three volunteers pick up food every day from MCFOODS and someone staffs the pantry every day. Volunteers pick up items when they are delivered by CFBNJ and stock the pantry.

CONCLUSION





CONCLUSION

The pandemic has exacerbated food insecurity for children and families, and households that have never used food pantries have turned to them. Throughout the pandemic, emergency food coalitions, food banks, county and municipal governments and volunteer and private non- and for-profit corporations along with countless volunteers have ensured that food and other resources have reached many people who need them. The federal Farmers to Families Food Boxes and the large amount of food flowing through supply chains that was diverted to the emergency food system, along with exceptionally generous donations from individuals, groups, and corporations, ensured that pantries had food and other goods to distribute during the pandemic. Much of this food expansion flowed through food banks like MCFOODS. MCFOODS' expansion has been essential in ensuring that pantries have enough food and that they have access to information about social services and other programs. MCFOODS' communications have been welcomed and enable pantries to pick up the items they really need when they are available. As MCFOODS' role has grown, we wonder whether it might consider forming a county wide emergency food

system Task Force with representatives from food pantries and food pantry coalitions across the county. The objective would be to increase communication, to build capacity, and to develop a strategic plan for the future.

It is unclear to what extent the shifts taken in response to the Covid-19 emergency will become permanent. For example, many pantries expanded their delivery systems and some mentioned that they would like to continue to provide, and even expand, delivery. But doing so will take significant resources. Some pantries adopted aggregation or distribution practices that they plan to continue. All look forward to returning to their regular interactions with pantry guests which they anticipate will enable them to better understand what people need. Pantries have also built other relationships with donors and with those who can access wholesale purchasing which enables pantries to buy food at a discount. Others have purchased from stores or asked for food and other donations.

Pantries report that pantry guests ask for help locating a variety of non-food forms of assistance including housing related help. As the social welfare state has been dismantled, people have turned to food pantries. As a result, food pantries have become critical entry points to the social service infrastructure including for families who have never

accessed services before. Most food pantries are volunteer run and those volunteers do not necessarily have the resources to know precisely where to direct people to reach the resources they need. One response could be to provide detailed and frequently updated service directory guides to food pantry volunteers and staff and to provide training so that staff know where to direct people who need assistance. But it seems unusual for society to add jobs to already overburdened often volunteer-run “emergency” food organizations. Another response might involve hosting public assistance staff including social workers at food pantries in a rotating system so that government agencies offer “pop-up” access to governmental programs.

INDIVIDUAL PANTRY EXPERIENCES



ALDRSGATE OUTREACH COMMUNITY CENTER AT ALDRSGATE METHODIST CHURCH

East Brunswick, NJ

A nearly fifty-year-old organization, Aldersgate Outreach Community Center in East Brunswick distributes food, diapers, baby food and formula, and provides extra food for families with children over the summer and before December school breaks. It primarily serves residents of Middlesex County and allows people outside of the county to visit once a month. Aldersgate serves families, single people, and seniors.

Because people were scared to visit the pantry when the pandemic started, the weekly number of guests dropped dramatically before increasing in May and June. Prior to the pandemic, the pantry served 80-100 people a week. It now serves 120. Some of the new guests were unemployed and had run low on food. The pantry delivers food to another 100 people at a senior home. Each month it distributes about 525 reusable bags with 20-25 pounds of food in each bag along with “extras.”



Image 7. Volunteers distributing food outside

Aldersgate aggregates food from a variety of sources. Before the pandemic, it received most of its food from CFBNJ which delivers monthly and provides access to the Oasis Insight software system for record keeping and reporting. Aldersgate participates in federal and state food programs and purchases through Agency Express which has been more challenging during the pandemic due to reduced supply. Though Aldersgate receives shipments from CFBNJ, its staff often visit CFBNJ between deliveries to pick items as they are available. Since the pandemic, it has increased the amount of food it receives from other sources. The pantry visits MCFOODS twice a week and it received federal fresh food boxes with 8 different kinds

of fruits and vegetables and cases with half gallons of milk which they broke down to let people choose the foods they wanted. It purchases food retail from grocery stores such as Aldi and wholesale from The Food Architects caterer in Piscataway. ShopRite and Stop & Shop donate unsold food such as deli items, dented cans, cakes, vegetables, salad mixes, pastries, breads, and dairy which the pantry picks up twice a week. The pantry also receives unwanted items from school lunches. When the pantry ran short, they requested items through Facebook and held food drives and collected food in a town recreation center truck. To support the pantry, the town hosts drives for food, gift cards, and money. A Girl Scout troop held a feminine

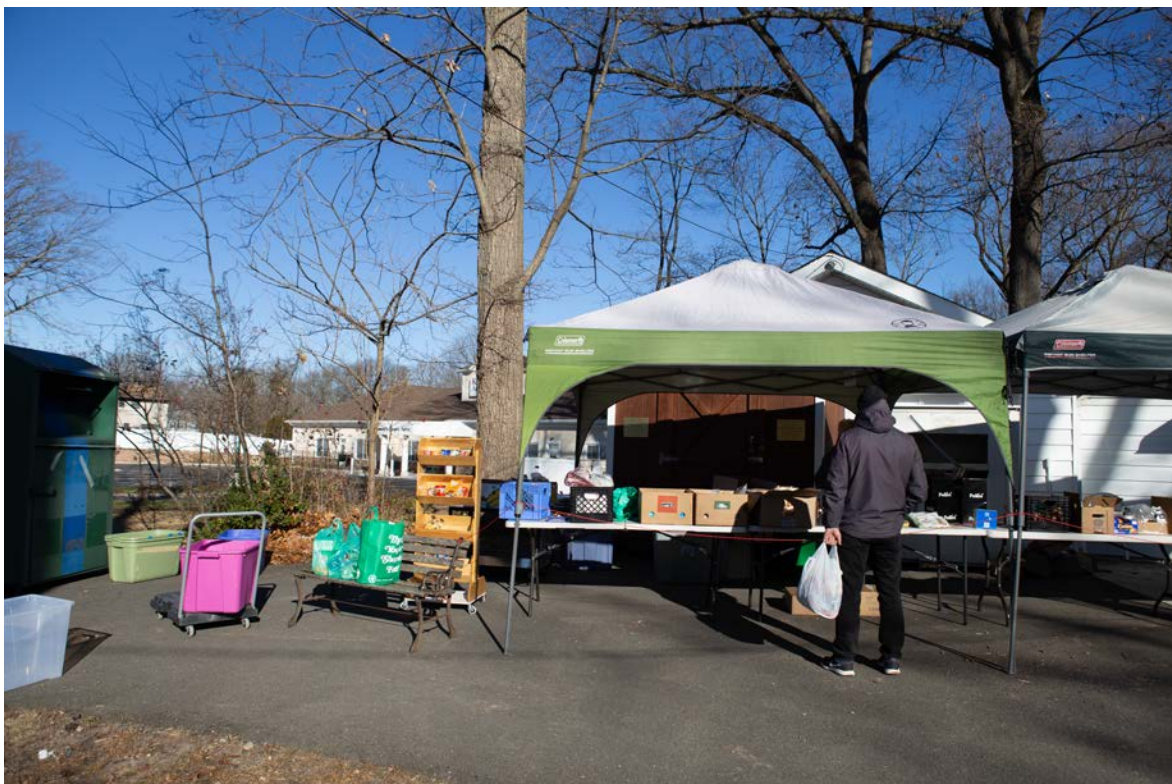


Image 8. Canopies and tables set up outside for clients to choose food and rolling bins to take food to cars

products drive. The pantry also received monetary donations and sales at its thrift shop provided additional funds. Due to Covid-19, the thrift shop closed from mid-March to late October 2020 and re-opened as a smaller outdoor market area to sell clothing and household goods when the pantry is open. The pantry also hosted two larger weekend outdoor sales. It applied for grants and received \$8,000 from the NJ Pandemic Fund to expand its refrigeration and freezer capacity. Aldersgate uses two 10 x 12' sheds, the vocational school built, to store thrift shop goods, the canopies, and equipment to distribute food outside and initially, to quarantine donated food. They store nonperishable food in their basement and in the pantry and perishable food in four commercial freezers and refrigerators and are awaiting two more.

Aldersgate operates a modified choice pantry. Before the pandemic, pantry guests received a pre-packed standard bag of food and can choose items from an array of fresh or frozen meat, fruits and vegetables, milk, cheese, eggs, bread, pastries, dry beans, peanut butter, jelly and miscellaneous non-perishables based on availability. In March, Aldersgate closed the pantry for three days while staff figured out how to operate during the pandemic. They decided to organize the pantry outside under canopies and to continue to use a mix of pre-

packed and choice distribution. They discontinued a number of volunteer partnerships including those with Jersey Cares and the Boy Scouts, and organized a core volunteer group to more easily track and control who was in the building in case of illness. They found that the pantry works best with 6-8 staff since they all don't work at the same time. A Rutgers student intern also works with them. Volunteers pre-pack bags with nonperishable items and organize tables, where pantry visitor's shop, with fruits and vegetables, cheese, and milk. A rope between the tables and visitors maintains social



Image 9. Signage and clients waiting in line for food

distancing. At the end of each day, the pantry operates an ionizer to clear the air.

When pantry visitors arrive, usually by car, they show their ID to pantry staff who register their visit in OASIS. Families receive a number and are called up to make selections from tables and receive pre-packed bags; volunteers place selections and bags in colored bins to ensure social distancing. The pantry also offers special items such as snack bags for children with cereal and milk or juice, granola bars, and a cookie and it distributes toothpaste, shampoo, soap, and cleaning supplies. Pantry guests can return items they won't use to a special bin and pantry staff quarantine those items for a week before cycling them back into distribution. In addition, each month the pantry staff pre-packs about 100 food bags which it delivers to residents of Hall's Corner Senior Apartments in East Brunswick. Before the pandemic, the pantry had been working with residents to create a shopping experience in a room at the housing development. Due to the pandemic, they opted instead to deliver groceries to people's doorsteps and would like to expand this effort to people living in other apartment buildings. Before the pandemic, the pantry did not deliver because it lacked the staff and volunteer capacity; however, it did deliver to a couple of households in East Brunswick.

The pantry provides turkeys, hams and chickens at Thanksgiving and Easter and registers families each October for the children's Christmas gift program. Previously, thrift shop volunteers created a Christmas "shop" with new toys, games, books and winter hats and scarves so that parents could shop for free based on the number and ages of their children. In 2020, they distributed gift cards instead. The East Brunswick Department of Recreation ran a gift card drive for the program and more than 160 families with almost 400 children received generous gift cards. East Brunswick businesses provided gift bags and gift cards for more than 150 seniors who visit the pantry.



Image 10. Food for clients to choose



BREAD OF LIFE FOOD PANTRY AT OUR LADY OF FATIMA CHURCH

Perth Amboy, NJ

Demand at Bread of Life Food Pantry in Perth Amboy more than doubled during the pandemic. It served 210-260 families each month during the pandemic, compared with 60-75 families who visited before.

The pantry gathers food and monetary donations from a variety of sources. It works with both food banks -- CFBNJ and MCFOODS -- and participates in the federal and state food programs. Each year it receives donations from Assemblyman Craig Coughlin's Bowl for Hunger Event and the Claretian Initiative and during the pandemic, it received donations from The Dominican Club in Perth Amboy, P.A.R.T.N.E.R.S., Troopers United Foundation Inc. and parish members. The pantry has preferred to receive food rather than money or volunteer time during the pandemic because it has been hard to purchase food and to manage additional volunteers in the context of Covid-19 safety protocols.

During the pandemic, the pantry shifted its food distribution system outside and continued to distribute pre-packed bags. Most pantry guests walk to the pantry, although

some drive. At the pantry they receive a number, and, after showing their ID to pantry staff who complete CFBNJ reporting, they receive 3-4 food bags which the pantry modifies if people have diet-related health needs. The pantry was able to distribute more food to each household during the pandemic because of the additional food it received at MCFOODS. They give a bag with canned items (rice/beans/canned veggies, juice) and cereal, one with miscellaneous items (coffee, chips, bread, etc.), one with fresh fruit and vegetables, and one with meat. The pantry delivers to one person who is ill.

The Bread of Life Food Pantry has about five consistent volunteers and are limited to 5-7 volunteers to maintain social distancing. Volunteers help to drive, load, and unload the van and pack food bags. They often have younger volunteers who are completing community service hours for high school or other purposes. They often find it more difficult to find volunteers over the summer and they found it challenging at the beginning of the pandemic.



COMMUNITY PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH FOOD PANTRY

Edison, NJ

The Community Presbyterian Church pantry serves about 30-35 households each month who reside in Edison. The pantry closed from mid-March and to mid-June during the early part of the pandemic. Since then, it has had greater demand. It receives donations from church members and groups and businesses in Edison and it picks-up food weekly at MCFOODS.

Masked pantry guests pick up pre-packed food once a month on Tuesdays or Thursdays from 9-11am. Before the pandemic, the pantry allowed guests to select some food items. Pantry staff have noted that an increased demand for housing.



EDISON HOUSING AUTHORITY

Edison, NJ

The Edison Housing Authority's food pantry was created in 2019 during the federal government shutdown. It serves about 80 families each month at two public housing sites with about 50 families at Robert Holmes Garden in North Edison and 20-25 families at Julius Engel Apartments in South Edison. The pantry director has seen at least a 50% increase in demand since March which includes Edison Housing Authority residents and people from surrounding towns including Plainfield and Elizabeth. The pantry visited MCFOODS four-to-five times before each

pantry distribution day and stored additional food in an unused community room. It also bought two big commercial refrigerators and two small freezers. Women from the Housing Authority's Resident Association help pack and distribute food bags. The number of bags people receive depends on income and family size. People line up outside and sign in to receive pre-packed bags and to select dairy products. Before the pandemic, pantry guests shopped at tables with signs that were labeled with the number of items people could choose. They note that pantry guests prefer cereal, pasta, beans, and sauces.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF METUCHEN

Metuchen, NJ

The First Presbyterian Church of Metuchen served 60-80 clients per week before the pandemic and approximately 400 families per month during it. Some of the increase may be related to the pantry's expansion of delivery services which doubled to 20 deliveries every week (80 per month). The pantry delivers to another 46 families in Imani Park (housing with support service geared towards the needs of homeless individuals and families),

Amandla Crossing (transitional housing program for homeless single parent families with public assistance), and the Mission First Housing project (which develops and manages affordable, safe and sustainable homes for people in need). Fifty-to-sixty clients pick up food at the pantry and the pantry makes lunches for children at local high schools.

Before the pandemic, nearly a third of the pantry's food was fresh compared with about 5% during it. Before the pandemic, the



Image 11. Volunteers waiting outside for clients to drive up at the First Presbyterian Church of Metuchen

pantry aggregated food from MCFOODS, their pantry garden, and a set of food drives hosted by elementary schools, Rutgers (twice a year), the YMCA, Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, and others. Whole Foods donated prepared foods. Maybe once or twice a year they purchased food if they ran low. During the pandemic, the pantry has found it more challenging to get food. The food drives stopped, bread has been in short supply, and they frequently ran out of food. Although they continued to pick up food at MCFOODS, it is hard to manage both the pantry operations and to travel frequently to get food. They do not have enough regular volunteers who can lift heavy food who also have cars. They did ask local businesses to donate. They donate prepared food to Rutgers Behavioral Health which provides residential treatment for some people who are housing insecure. The pantry has had a partnership with Whole Foods since 2017, and it picks up food that did not sell such as cut fruit, bread, and produce. The pantry director asked for prepared foods during the pandemic to distribute to people who are homeless who are being housed in hotels. The pantry also accepts diapers, toiletries, face masks, and hygiene products. The pantry does not ask for monetary donations, but received \$20,000 in the early part of the pandemic when people did not feel safe shopping. Though the pantry struggled to buy what they

wanted early in the pandemic, having money enabled them to buy in bulk at lower prices once supplies were restocked and to purchase paper and plastic biodegradable bags (people are not allowed to bring their own bags during the pandemic) and signage. They store items in a designated room with shelves and an industrial refrigerator. During the pandemic they expanded into another room to ensure social distancing.

The pantry's hours - Wednesdays and Thursdays 9am-11am - are the same as before the pandemic, and guests can visit once a month. Before the pandemic, only residents of Metuchen and Edison could visit; during the pandemic everyone is welcome. The pantry shifted its distribution approach from client choice before the pandemic to pre-bagged during and distributes about 800 pounds of food each month. Most clients drive; about five percent walk. Volunteers prepare two bags of food for each guest which



Image 12. Inside the FPC Pantry

they place in car trunks. Bags include cans of vegetables, beans, tuna, meat, spaghetti-o's, and tomato sauce, and soup, and "dried" soup (soup mix or ramen), milk, cereal, pasta, jelly, side dishes (like mashed potatoes), snacks (such as animal crackers and potato chips), peanut butter, mac and cheese, applesauce, and sometimes drinks, hygiene products, diapers, and other goods. Volunteers may offer fresh produce and other items if there are not many people waiting for food. The pantry puts a flyer in each bag that asks people to return food they don't use, and people have returned food. The pantry delivered during the pandemic initially about 8-10 times a week. As demand grew, they used LogistiCare; its drivers pick up food on

Wednesdays and deliver it. The pantry would like to continue to provide delivery after the pandemic, but they don't expect the LogistiCare service to continue. First Presbyterian's pantry has one part-time paid staff member who runs the pantry and picks up food from food banks when volunteers are unavailable. Eight-to-ten volunteers come consistently every week and 5-6 volunteers can be called for extra help. It is not always easy to find volunteers who can pick food up from food banks because food is heavy and many volunteers are older. Pre-pandemic, volunteers helped pantry visitors choose food. During the pandemic volunteers stock shelves, sort and pack food, and three volunteers load cars to minimize contact.



Image 13. Volunteers loading cars with food at FPC food pantry



MAKING IT POSSIBLE TO END HOMELESSNESS (MIPH)

Edison, NJ

MIPH receives nonperishable food and toilet paper, paper towels, and cleaning products from MCFOODS and the First Presbyterian Church of Metuchen, and it has received assistance from the Diocese of Metuchen's Operation Rice Bowl. Faith based community partners and community groups including First Presbyterian Church, First Baptist Church, St. Lukes Church, New Hope Baptist Church, Greek Orthodox Church, Friends of Frasier Foundation, and the Christopher Morrissey Foundation provide support during holidays which includes donations of fresh food, prepared meals, food baskets, hygiene kits, gift cards for residents, and wish list items for families with children. Masks by the Bay and Feeding Middlesex County donated face masks.

MIPH, in partnership with First Presbyterian Church of Metuchen, provides two bags of food per week to households at Amandla Crossing and Imani Park on a rotating weekly basis. Before Covid, they provided at least one bag every other week as-needed. Residents are at increased risk for Covid so the organization has increased the amount of food it provides during the pandemic. Residents can also use LogistiCare in emergencies. People who do not need the food return it and it is restocked in the pantry - families with children tend not to return food. MIPH has worked with Volunteers of America and their own residents to distribute food and need more volunteers and a volunteer pantry/donation coordinator to increase capacity. In 2021 the pantry would like to store fresh food, and it will need to organize volunteers to take care of it.



MIDDLESEX COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE FOOD PANTRY

Edison, NJ

The Middlesex County College Food Pantry serves Middlesex County College students. Before the pandemic, the pantry served 100 students a month and was open three-to-four hours a day, three days a week. During the pandemic, it served a peak of 225 students early in the pandemic and about 150 during the Fall semester. About 50 students who participated in the food pantry did not register for college in the fall which reduced demand at this pantry.

The Middlesex County College food pantry gathers most of its food from MCFOODS (College facilities staff pick up on Tuesdays). It also accepts monetary and food donations along with toiletries, hygiene products, and diapers (typically from students, staff, and alumni), and it maintains an Amazon wishlist. Diapers are its biggest non-food need. Before the pandemic, the pantry gathered food in bins placed around the campus. During the pandemic it purchased and set up an outdoor donation bin for contactless donations on campus.

In the Fall of 2020, the pantry benefitted from food drives sponsored by student clubs (PTK, the Organization of Latino Unity, The Philosophy club, Student Life), the College Childcare Center, and an enormous donation from Sewa Diwali. The pantry has had plenty of storage during the pandemic in an unused classroom, and will need more space for students to shop in person with adequate social distancing in the future. The pantry was organized as a choice pantry before the pandemic and intends to return to this approach after. Before the pandemic, they mostly distributed snacks to enable students to get through the school day.

Since going remote in March 2020, students needed the pantry to provide food for their families. Donations for the pantry, through Middlesex County College's foundation, enabled the pantry to purchase supermarket gift cards which were especially useful early in the pandemic when students could not travel to campus. During those weeks, the pantry distributed \$1,200 per week in supermarket gift cards.

MONROE TOWNSHIP SENIOR SERVICES

Monroe Township, NJ

The Monroe Township food pantry was founded in 1993 to help meet the needs of hunger and to organize within their community to prevent hunger in the future. The food pantry relies on private food and monetary contributions to ensure that all Monroe residents in need have access to nutritious food.

The pantry receives nonperishable food, toiletries, paper products, and monetary donations from individuals, clubs, organizations, and businesses; it paused donations during the pandemic because of an inability to maintain social distancing. MCFOODS provided about 60% of the food during the fall of 2020. After April 6, 2020, the pantry requested only monetary donations; it received about \$40,000 and bought additional foods they don't usually purchase such as quinoa, eggs, and protein bars. Because people have been so generous, the pantry has not experienced any shortages. They explained: "There was a man who came by and gave someone \$500, no questions asked. Another woman sends \$200 every month since the pandemic." The pantry also purchases gift cards which enables people to

purchase what they need. For example, the pantry does not distribute diapers and formula so people can use gift cards to purchase those. The food pantry maintained its pre-pandemic schedule and is open the first Wednesday of every month. There was no eligibility requirement during the pandemic, and, as of mid-fall 2020, it served 102 people, 68 seniors, 21 adults, and 13 children monthly, up from 60 before the pandemic.



Image 14. Contactless delivery for homebound seniors
Photo courtesy of Joseph Giancaspro

Each November and December, the pantry provides holiday baskets filled with turkey, gravy, and lots of holiday foods to a set of households with children in the public schools. The pantry also invites those households to apply to receive food through the food pantry but the families do not usually apply for it. During the pandemic, the pantry shifted to curbside pickup. Participants provide their name and pantry staff put 2-4 large packed recyclable bags (from reusable.org) in their trunk, a shift from their pre-pandemic practice of enabling people to select some food items. Bags are filled with non-perishable food, paper towels, and toilet paper. The pantry distributes pasta, sauce, canned vegetables, tuna, canned chicken,



Image 15. Packing up the car to deliver food
Photo courtesy of Joseph Giancaspro

beans, rice, mac and cheese, soup, crackers, rice, cereal, peanut butter, and jelly and it modifies bag contents for people with diet-related health issues. The pantry also instituted contactless delivery after they learned of seniors who could not leave their homes. And they helped people who had the money to shop, but feared shopping during the pandemic because they are in higher risk groups. Using the Nixle alert system and social media, the pantry announced a need for shoppers, and more than 180 people volunteered. As they explained, “For that delivery program, we connected people. In a matter of a week. It was up to volunteer residents to work with whomever they were partnered up with to figure out a schedule. Some people didn’t even want food delivered, they just wanted someone to talk to.” Before the pandemic, six people volunteered at the food pantry. On March 12th, staff started working from home except for the Director. The Director and one volunteer kept the pantry going and coordinated the food shopping delivery service. Since June, to maintain social distancing, the pantry has one volunteer and two staff running the food pantry. Volunteers sort and organize food and assemble bags. Staff and the transportation department help to distribute it.



NEW BEGINNINGS FOOD PANTRY

Edison, NJ

New Beginnings Food Pantry served 45-50 families (about 100 people per month) before the pandemic and 75-100 families (about 200-225 people per month) during it. It picks up food regularly from CFBNJ and MCFOODS to ensure that fresh foods don't spoil and to stock up on dairy products like milk and cheese. They maximize their freezer and refrigerator space and during the pandemic did not need to rent storage space because of unused space in the church. The pantry opens the fourth Saturday of each month, and, to increase social distancing, it expanded its hours to 10-3 from 1-3. During the pandemic, the pantry continued to offer pre-packed bags, stopped serving premade meals, and altered its pickup process. Instead of entering the church, people park in the street, sign-in, and wait masked, in a socially distanced line. Depending on household size, the pantry distributes a combination of dry goods and fruit, vegetables, milk, eggs, frozen meals, and bread, chips or candy, and sometimes easy-to-bake foods.

They distributed toilet paper during the pandemic because it was hard to find. The pantry had enough food during the pandemic, but needed hygiene products like lotion and toothpaste and laundry detergent. The pantry partners with Lindeneau Elementary School to distribute food boxes and Thanksgiving boxes to school families in need. When the pandemic ends, the pantry plans to continue the pick-up process it has been using during the pandemic which keeps the pantry flowing faster, and it will return to preparing meals. The pantry kept its regular volunteers, who are mostly members of the church, during the pandemic and was reluctant to have new volunteers because of Covid-19. Volunteers make food boxes, organize and stock inventory, and help bring food boxes to cars. Some volunteers speak Spanish which helps in the pantry's communications with the community.



OLD BRIDGE TOWNSHIP FOOD BANK

Old Bridge, NJ

The Old Bridge Township food bank served more than 170 Old Bridge households per month during the pandemic up from 130-140 before it. Demand increased from late April to June and from late September to October. They attribute the increase to: the result of the end of unemployment benefits; families who lost an income as one parent stayed home to assist with remote learning; a need for more food as children remain at home to learn remotely, and an increase in unemployed restaurant workers.

The Old Bridge Township food bank aggregates food and resources from a variety of sources. They receive financial support from the municipality, the federal Community Development Block Grant program, and the DuPont Corporation. They pick up from MCFOODS as needed, public schools, clubs, and businesses run food drives, and people donate money. At the beginning of the pandemic, they received many food and monetary donations, but found it difficult to buy what they needed. They used to order food through ShopRite, but during the pandemic ordering was limited and they quickly realized that it was easier if people donated food rather than money. In mid

April, they added rolling donation bins for contactless food drop off and increased privacy by separating the people who receive food from those who donate it. The pantry quarantines food before sorting it. By August the pantry was able to purchase in bulk from ShopRite again. ShopRite also sometimes donates meat and chicken. The pantry purchases eggs and milk from Cream-O-Land and bread from ShopRite. In the summer they partnered with the local farmers association and the YMCA and received federal Farms to Families fresh food boxes from the Seashore Fruit and Produce Company. The boxes contained about 10 pounds of fruit and veggies and fed a family for two weeks.

Old Bridge's schedule remained the same during the pandemic; it is open Tuesday to Thursday from 10am-12pm. A public pantry, it serves residents of Old Bridge who can visit up to three times in an emergency capacity. After that, the pantry talks with guests to better understand their needs. Their intake process is outlined on their [website](#). Before the pandemic, potential clients visited in person, completed paperwork and provided proof of income, and pantry staff guided them

through applying for and using SNAP benefits. During the pandemic, the pantry has observed that some people have needed assistance for a few months while others have needed longer term support. To visit, residents set up appointments, once per month, a practice that predates the pandemic. Residents select items from a list which includes foods such as eggs, milk (whole, 2% and 1%), fresh bread, vegetables, and meat, and non-food items such as toilet paper and other toiletries, and they can email, fax, or drop the list off at the pantry a week before the scheduled pick-up date. Before the pandemic, residents could “shop” for some items inside. The pantry implemented the list and choice process to reduce waste, easily manage their inventory, and provide a better sense of client preferences. During the pandemic, pantry staff pre-pack bags with the items marked on the lists and put them in a cart. They have also responded to emergency food requests after people have called 911 to report that they did not have food. Police delivered those bags. The pantry delivered food for “high-risk” clients, a new practice during the pandemic.

Bus drivers from the senior center have helped to deliver food but they won’t be able to once the center reopens. The pantry is concerned about how it will distribute food outside when it gets colder especially with limited staff. They are working out a plan to minimize how much time they spend outside that would enable someone to drive up, call the pantry, and then the pantry staff will take the bags outside. Fifteen people volunteered with Old Bridge’s pantry before the pandemic (five per day), but many of these volunteers are older and part of the population that is especially vulnerable to Covid-19. During the first three-to-four months of the pandemic, the pantry manager and one other person ran the food pantry and they worked from home. They sorted, packed, and brought bags where they needed to go. They would receive emergency calls from the police to provide food to people on the weekends. Later, a bus driver and a receptionist helped with the pantry.

“THE PANTRY” AT PRINCETON ALLIANCE CHURCH

Plainsboro, NJ

The Pantry at Princeton Alliance Church serves people who live in 14 towns within a 5-mile radius of the pantry. In Middlesex County, these communities are South Brunswick, Monmouth Junction, Kendall Park, Kingston, Plainsboro, Dayton, Monroe, Jamesburg, and Cranbury. In Mercer County they are East and West Windsor, Hightstown, Princeton, and Princeton Junction. During the pandemic, the pantry has been serving 160-180 families per month compared with

110 before it. They have observed an increase in higher income people who have run out of savings and unemployment assistance as well as seniors and international students studying at Princeton Seminary.

During the pandemic, the pantry received more fresh fruit, vegetables, and dairy, and continued to receive donated prepared food and to purchase as well as receive donations of toilet paper, personal care items, and



Image 16. Raised garden beds at “The Pantry”

diapers. Before the pandemic, the pantry ran 3 internal food drives a year, and received monetary donations from parishioners and occasionally shelf stable goods from schools and other institutions. They also received produce from Stults Farm. The pantry has a box truck which makes it easy to pick up donated food. During the pandemic, they started visiting MCFOODS. The pantry purchases in bulk from Sam's Club and Dollar Tree and grows produce in the warmer months. A congregant tends the church's 20 raised garden beds and grant funding supported the addition of a chicken coop which produces fresh eggs. They complemented this with federal Farms to Families fresh food boxes from the Princeton YMCA with yogurt, cottage cheese, hard-boiled eggs, and fresh produce from August-October 2020. The pantry also picks-up



Image 17. Donated food from Wawa

donated food from Costco three times a month twice a week from Wawa and Panera.⁷ The pantry increased its food distribution so much during the pandemic that it created a new staging area to accommodate the expansion. The pantry is open on Wednesdays from 4-6pm, a change from their pre pandemic hours of Wednesdays 1-3 and Thursdays 7-8:30pm. They open a half hour earlier on Wednesdays. About six years ago the pantry adopted a “personal shopping experience” distribution approach. As the director explained, “it made sense to allow people to shop for what they knew their family needed and raise their dignity level if they had a choice. It’s set up like a mini mart. It was a point system based on household members. They could go around and choose what they wanted. They would check out with a volunteer based on the points.” During the pandemic, to ensure contactless delivery, clients drive up to pick-up food using a contactless process. Families receive food based on a point system which translates to the number of bags of food each receives. Some households receive 4 or 5 bags; larger families might receive 6 or 7 bags. They serve about 160 families a month and make about 800 bags of food per month. Pre-packing bags is a switch from their pre-pandemic

⁷ Wawa participates in a program called Food Donation Connection, a food rescue organization that partners with companies to divert prepared foods to communities that need them. Panera Bread operates a program called Day-End Dough-Nation to move food to those who need.

practice, but clients can individualize their orders by calling the office with their order. Pantry staff are eager to find strategies to more easily and effectively manage inventory and are exploring a software program called “Smart Choice” which the Franklin Food Bank suggested. The software operates a remote ordering system so clients can create their own orders, and the pantry can track its inventory.

The pantry is one function of He Cares We Care (HCWC), the benevolence ministry of Princeton Alliance Church. Three coordinators support the pantry along with

the communications department. One spends 2 full days and a small portion of the rest of her week supporting HCWC – she is bilingual. The other two split their time more evenly between the 2 departments working on administrative tasks. The pantry could not operate without volunteers. Pantry volunteers often bring friends who come from other churches and anyone can volunteer. The volunteer pool has been greatly reduced during the pandemic, and initially people were afraid to volunteer but they have been getting more volunteers recently. It is often more difficult to get volunteers during the day when many people are working.



Image 18. Box truck for deliveries



ST. FRANCIS CATHEDRAL'S FOOD PANTRY

Metuchen, NJ

St. Francis Cathedral serves members of the St. Francis Cathedral parish and residents of Metuchen and Edison. The parish center closed on March 20 and reopened on September 15, 2020. When it closed, it donated most of its food to the St. Vincent de Paul pantry in Perth Amboy and provided food only in emergencies. It serves about 20-30 pantry visitors once per month, and, at its peak, provided food for 40 people. When the pantry reopened, fewer people visited. Pantry staff think people did not realize they were open or were afraid to go out.

St. Francis's pantry gathers food from donations by parishioners who bring non-perishable food and laundry detergent, toothpaste, shampoo, deodorant, and cleaning supplies to the cathedral. The cathedral's custodians collect the donations and clean and disinfect them before delivering them to the pantry. St. Francis uses monetary donations to help people with rent/evictions, car repairs, coats, and other necessities. The monetary donations were especially helpful during the pandemic because of increased unemployment. With the exception of Thanksgiving, they only accept nonperishable

foods. They host a turkey drive in November and store about 25 turkeys and the rest of the turkeys collected go to CFBNJ. If they have an overload of donations, they send them to the St. Vincent de Paul food pantry in Perth Amboy, part of the Catholic Diocese of Metuchen.

St. Francis Cathedral formalized its pantry pick-up process in November 2018. Prior to 2018, people visited the Parish Center and asked for food when they needed it. Since then, to pick up food, people call on Monday to schedule an appointment for pick-up on Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday between 9am and 1pm. People must wear masks, sign-in with their name, address, phone number, and number of people in the household and pick up bagged food on a cart outside to maximize social distancing. The amount of food they receive depends on household size with a maximum of five bags. The pantry director gives each household a little bit of what the pantry has which usually includes rice, canned vegetables and fruit, canned soup, pasta, and oatmeal. Most people drive to the pantry. The pantry does not deliver, but some religious ministers bring food to people who are homebound if they need it.

ST. PAUL'S EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH FOOD PANTRY

Edison, NJ

St. Paul's Pantry in Edison serves anyone in need up to two times per month. It served 30-40 clients per month before the pandemic and 50-60 households each week (with 5-6 new households each week) during it. During 2020, the pantry served 339 people compared with 156 people in 2019 and distributed about 70,000 pounds of food. The majority of pantry guests are from Middlesex County (65%) and many of those were from Edison

(40% of all visitors). Slightly more than a quarter of guests (28%) are from Union County. Before the pandemic most pantry visitors received social security or disability assistance, lived nearby, and had low incomes. They walked, rode bikes, or drove inexpensive cars to the pantry. During the pandemic, pantry staff and volunteers noticed a shift. New people who visit the pantry dress differently and drive more expensive cars, and



Image 19. Pre-packed bags of food waiting to be picked up by clients

the pantry saw more people from outside of Edison. In 2020, 40% of pantry guests were Edison residents compared with 60% in 2019. In 2020, outside of Edison, the pantry saw 59 people from Plainfield, 34 from Perth Amboy, and 22 from Elizabeth. In October, they noticed increased demand from people who are homeless. St. Paul's pantry has been in operation for about 30 years and grew from a desktop to a closet to a cabinet, and, about six years ago, expanded into a dedicated room and shifted to client choice. St. Paul seeks the highest quality food (high nutrition, variety of food groups, fresh including produce, frozen) for the lowest price within budget constraints. They aggregate food from a variety of sources including both regional food banks. They do not participate in the federal or state food programs, but they do order from CFBNJ's Agency Express and pick up from MCFOODS. During the pandemic, some of the food the pantry received was in packages that were too large to distribute so the pantry



Image 20. Contactless pick-up of food

partnered with caterers and restaurants to re-package it. In the past, WaWa and Starbucks donated frozen sandwiches and Panera donated bread. The pantry raises monetary donations which they use to purchase about one third of the food they distribute. In 2020, they spent \$60,000 in comparison with \$15,000-20,000 in 2019. Before the pandemic, most of the monetary donations came from parishioners. During the pandemic, they received donations from outside as well. In March and April they were unable to purchase what they wanted in stores or from CFBNJ, and, in early fall, there was a decrease in fresh food at MCFOODS. They partnered with the First Presbyterian Church in Metuchen which organized 4-5 food drives and shared the proceeds with them. Throughout the pandemic, they could have purchased more food from grocery stores, but they did not want to clear shelves and leave little for others. When the pantry ran short on certain items, it distributed fewer per household. The pantry also receives diapers, hygiene products, detergent, and toiletries (toothbrushes, raisers, toothpaste). It purchased large quantities of laundry detergent and diapers twice during the pandemic from Target. The pantry also organizes cooking utensil and spice drives. They store the food in two consumer-sized refrigerators with a freezer, a chest freezer, and in the church kitchen which they have

been able to use for storage during the pandemic. This storage space limits the amount of perishable food they can receive. As the pandemic has continued, they have expanded into other parts of the church to store food which has been possible with less activity at the church.

St. Paul's pantry is open Wednesdays and Thursdays 10am-noon and by appointment for emergencies. Before the pandemic, the pantry distributed food to families at the church's childcare center on some nights and people could visit once a month for nonperishable food on Thursdays and twice a month on Wednesdays for fresh produce. St. Paul's Pantry modified its distribution process in a variety of ways during the pandemic. Before mid-March, it operated a choice approach which enabled pantry users to select some items from shelves and to receive fresh produce and frozen items. During the pandemic, people drive to the pantry sometimes carpooling and one person from each car registers at pick-up by signing and providing an address and indicating if there are items they do not eat such as meat, and they receive a number. Volunteers load pre-packed food boxes with about \$60 worth of food, more than before the pandemic, into cars and food is distributed by car rather than by household. Volunteers add meat and produce when available. The pantry thinks it

has been distributing more produce during the pandemic than before although it was more difficult to get fresh produce during the fall. The pantry also prepares meal kits for people who are homeless that include ready-made meals and utensils and can openers as needed. Since the pantry registers new households each week, it has increased parking lot signage and added cones to direct traffic through the pick-up process. If someone arrives without a car, the pantry offers to deliver their food which it might do or it might use Logisticare. They deliver to



Image 21. Sign in table for clients

seven households every other Wednesday and to some families with children at Ben Franklin school where nurses identify households who need additional food. Before the pandemic, they provided weekend food for 16 families. Now they provide food for three households through contactless dropoff and stopped using reusable bags because of Covid-19. Before the pandemic, St. Paul's operated an emergency pantry. After the pandemic, it would like to operate a one-stop shop to provide what households need to make their budgets work. They would like to distribute fresh and nutritious food with some variety and a bit of surprise and fun just like if you were shopping for your family. They would

like to return to offer choice along with the wider selection of foods like they have been getting during the pandemic. They would increase fresh produce, help people bring food to their cars so they can take more than one bag, and continue to deliver to people who need it. Approximately 33 people work at St. Paul's pantry. About 15 are in the main rotation of people who shop, pick up food and deliver it to the pantry, sort and box and distribute it to clients. During the pandemic, older volunteers were no longer able to help, but younger volunteers stepped in. Some pantry volunteers worked in the pantry alone; others did pantry work from home.



Image 22. Welcome sign at St. Paul's Food Pantry



ZION HILL BAPTIST CHURCH FOOD PANTRY

Piscataway, NJ


Zion Hill Baptist Church's pantry experienced an increase from 50 to about 75-100 families each week during the pandemic. Initially they prepared food for 50, saw an increase and prepared more, and it gradually increased to 75-100 families each week. Its population became more diverse during the pandemic with more families with school-aged children, younger people, and families who live in hotels.

Before the pandemic, Zion received food from a variety of sources including Stop 'N Shop, ShopRite grants (through CFBNJ for \$1,500-\$2,000 which let pantries purchase foods from ShopRite), Panera (day old food), and Fish, Inc, a nonprofit in Dunellen, which shares items they receive from BJ's or Costco. During the pandemic, Zion leaned more on its religious community for support and people donated food, gift cards, and money.

Zion's pantry is open once a week on Thursdays and one Tuesday a month to distribute food from CFBNJ. They changed their hours during the pandemic. One day they moved from 4-6 to the afternoon because more people were at home and could come earlier in the day. Each family receives five

bags of food with nonperishable foods, produce, meat, frozen foods, orange juice, milk, eggs and other items if available. Milk, eggs, orange juice, and chicken are popular and people like produce and prefer items they know how to cook like potatoes rather than eggplant. The pantry received produce boxes from MCFOODS and distributed some in whole to households that could use it and others they divided up. Some participants exchange unwanted items, a practice pantry organizers observed early in the pandemic when food was diverted into the emergency food system from restaurant supply chains and there were more items that people were unfamiliar with or did not want. Zion modified its pick-up process during the pandemic. They ask people to assemble in a socially distanced line outside wearing gloves and a mask and pantry staff hand them bags. Before the pandemic, pantry visitors chose items from tables. Zion also handles emergency food requests and sometimes delivers. Once a week, they distribute food boxes to people at hotels and deliver 16-18 bags to seniors, if they are unable to pick them up.

Zion Hill's pantry has about the same number of volunteers it did before the pandemic, about 6 people, and if they wanted more, they could get them. People who used to work in the organization's soup kitchen have shifted over to help the pantry. The pantry has limited the number of people inside the building to ensure social distancing. Two to three volunteers pick up food every day from MCFOODS and someone staffs the pantry every day. Volunteers pick up items when they are delivered by CFBNJ and stock the pantry ensuring that everything goes on shelves or is refrigerated and nothing is on the floor.

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