

# EMERGENCY FOOD SYSTEM CHALLENGES

## FOOD PANTRY PRACTICES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The *Middlesex County Emergency Food System Covid-19 Pandemic* report examines how a set of food pantries in Middlesex County, NJ experienced the pandemic from March to October/November 2020.

### DEMAND

- Demand for food and non-food products such as clothing, diapers, toilet paper, and personal care products surged during as people lost work, parents left jobs to support children who were learning remotely, and when the additional federal unemployment benefits ended. Pantries saw an increase in higher income households as well as individuals and families who became homeless.

### NEW PATHWAYS TO FOOD

- In the early months of the pandemic, pantries received a surge of food as businesses, restaurants and schools abruptly closed. Some of this food came in unusual sizes which led pantries to create innovative strategies such as partnering with restaurants to divide restaurant-sized portions. During summer and early fall, some pantries struggled to access food as some items became difficult to acquire such as canned food and meat. Pantries also were unable to buy food in bulk through their usual discounted emergency food system pathway. Given these challenges, some pantries built relationships with wholesale partners which enabled them to purchase food in bulk. Pantries also received fresh food including produce and milk through the federal Farmers to Families food boxes.

### FOOD DISTRIBUTION

- Most pantries moved food distribution outside, required that people wear masks, and pre-packed food. Some brought food directly to people's cars minimizing social contact while others enabled people to select some food from tables with the help of volunteers.

### FOOD DELIVERY

- With some people scared to leave their homes and others unable, many pantries created new or expanded existing food delivery programs. Some used LogistiCare, a national non-emergency medical transport service, that the state allowed to deliver food during the pandemic. One pantry paired volunteers with those who were unable to shop for themselves.

### COMMUNICATION

- As communication between pantries and clients decreased due to social distancing measures, some pantries turned to social media to keep community members informed while others used the phone. Daily emails from MCFOODS, the county food bank, to food pantries provided information about available food and critical information about social services and support for food pantries.

### SOCIAL SERVICE SUPPORT

- Food pantries became an even more critical entry point to social services. Some families who have never accessed services before reached out for help with rental and utility assistance, mental health issues, emergency housing, and other needs. Some pantries provided services and monetary support directly.

### VOLUNTEERS

- Most pantries saw a decline in the number of volunteers to ensure social distancing and contact tracing, which was a challenge as demand and pantry work increased.