



# COVID-19 STRATEGIC PLAN FOR FOOD SECURITY

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**NC Cooperative Extension – Wake County Center**

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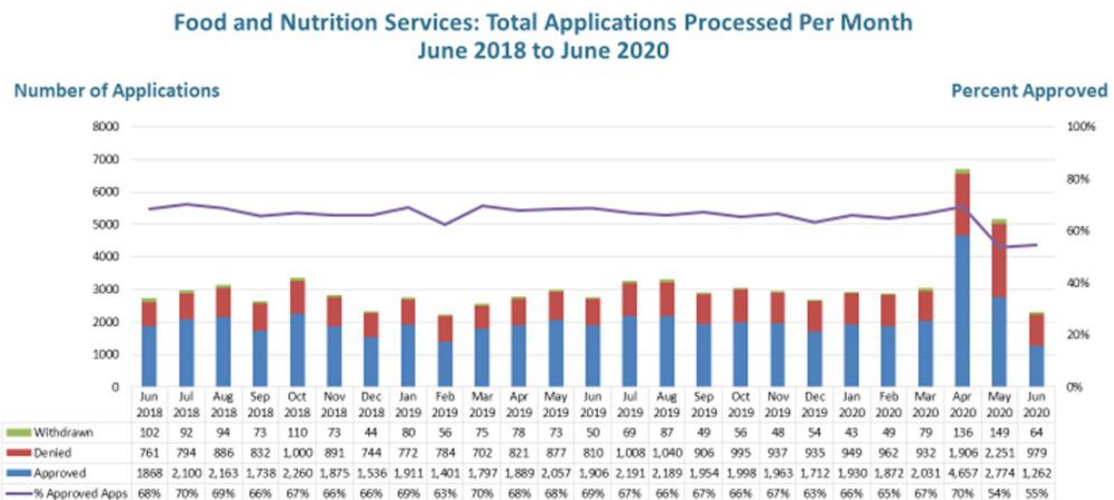
## INTRODUCTION:

The Covid-19 Strategic Plan for Food Security seeks to minimize the number of individuals facing food insecurity by increasing access to nutritious, fresh and culturally appropriate foods through strong partnerships and regional distribution hubs. The plan covers September 1, 2020 – December 31, 2020 and utilizes federal funding to address the increasing numbers of food insecure individuals in Wake County as a result of the economic strain placed on our community by Covid-19.

The plan seeks to provide immediate access to foods while also building community support systems to provide services for food insecure individuals long-term. The plan accounts for fluctuations in numbers of food insecure individuals, as well as fluctuations in funding sources and community capacity as we move further into the Covid-19 pandemic. Flexibility and adaptability are key to plans moving forward, and emphasis should be placed on strategies regionally aligned with the needs of the diverse communities across our large county.

## FOOD INSECURITY & IMPACTS OF COVID-19

A food insecure individual lacks access to healthy, affordable, and culturally appropriate foods. Prior to Covid-19 13.7% of Wake County residents were identified as food insecure. Covid-19 and the resulting closure of schools, congregate feeding sites, and drastic unemployment rates created the perfect storm for the number of food insecure individuals to skyrocket in Wake County. Feeding America projects that the number of food insecure residents has risen to 15.3% as a result of Covid-19 (*source Feeding America Map the Meal Gap*). Since March 15<sup>th</sup>, 2020 the county has seen a rise in the number of individuals seeking food assistance. Social Services has seen SNAP caseload increase from 30,020 (households) at the end of February to 37,432 at the end of June. The Food Bank of Central and Eastern NC has reported a 57% increase in individuals visiting food pantries across the county from March 2020 to July 2020. And over 2.2 million meals have been given to families in need through a combination of school & community sites.



Source: Client Services Data Warehouse (CSDW). WCHS review of measure id HSDIR\_FNS\_01 completed on 2/21/2019. The data in this chart represents the total number of applications disposed during the specified month by disposition and the percentage of all applications disposed that were approved. July 2019 through June 2020 data was extracted on July 13, 2020.

Note: An application is approved if a client meets eligibility requirements. An application can be denied if a client does not meet eligibility requirements or fails, after two requests, to provide documentation within 30 days from the date of the application. A withdrawn application is an application the client withdrew prior to determination of eligibility.

Seniors are a greater risk for being food insecure, and present unique challenges as they are at highest risk of serious complications from Covid-19. Seniors who might typically utilize family and community systems to access food as they would normally are discovering difficulties accessing safe services. Since March 2020 Meals on Wheels has been able to add 362 Seniors to their distributions, and each senior receives seven meals each week. Additionally, Resources for Seniors has worked with the Center for Volunteer Caregivers to deliver groceries and needed supplies to homebound seniors in pockets of need around Wake County. Seniors are one population that will continue to require innovative and safe home delivery options to meet their dietary needs. Access to milk and produce has also been noted as a barrier to non-profits serving seniors.

## **MOVING FORWARD – CHALLENGES & UNKNOWNNS**

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Currently meals are provided largely by funding from the USDA Summer Food Program, the USDA Farmer to Family Program, and support from Interfaith Food Shuttle and the Food Bank of Central and Eastern NC. Both food banks practice “Fair Share” models, which limit the amount of resources provided to any one county in their service areas. Wake County has tremendous need, and continued funding is needed to support food service efforts. Since the closure of schools many partners have joined together to provide hot meals, family style meals, shelf stable product, and produce boxes at a variety of schools, churches, pantries, mobile home parks, apartment complexes, and community centers. There have been 32 curbside school sites, 46 Big Bus Food Truck routes, and 127 community sites operating since March of 2020. Additionally, over 321 homeless students living in 37 different hotels across Wake County have been provided daily and weekend meals since March.

It is still unknown if the USDA will extend the Summer Food Program into the fall semester or instead switch to the National School Lunch Program. Currently, the SFSP Operation system is set to expire August 31, 2020 and Big Bus Food Truck Routes operated by WCPSS are set to end August 28<sup>th</sup> as schools prepare to reopen for the fall semester. This will result in a drastic decrease in the number of prepared meals going out to families with transportation issues or work hours that conflict with lunch time distributions. Currently meals are served at around 104 community sites, many of which will not be able to continue once the SFSP program is no longer available.

It is also unknown how long funding for the Farmer to Family (produce box) program will continue beyond September 2020. This program has been instrumental in providing adequate nutrition to food insecure families and has been effective in expanding options for families to prepare their own culturally appropriate meals at home.

In addition to funding transitions, the current food relief efforts rely heavily on volunteers provided by WCPSS and individuals who have been furloughed or unemployed as a result of the pandemic. Many of these volunteers are returning to work, resulting in a decrease in the number of volunteers available to continue the heavy lift required for daily meal delivery. Those volunteers that are not returning to work are beginning to experience burn out and are seeking ways to reduce the days of service for their models or alter their systems to rely on less volunteers.

In the bigger picture, supply and distribution provide their own unique challenges. WCPSS CNS and our food banks and food pantries are struggling with consistent access to meat, dairy, and certain shelf stable items at an affordable rate, despite efforts of the USDA to enhance access to meat and dairy for their farm to family program. The food relief efforts to date have relied on a temporary supply of box trucks and volunteer drivers. As the economy has begun to pick back up, the supply of drivers and trucks has become unreliable, resulting in uncertainties of getting needed food supplies to

community partners across the county. Addressing supply chain and delivery issues at the top of the service model is vital to the long-term success of the strategies outlined in this plan.

## **FUNDING FOR FOOD SECURITY ASSISTANCE**

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The CARES Act, H.R. 748 signed into law on March 27<sup>th</sup>, 2020 provides flexible funding to state, local, tribal, and territorial governments, and public agencies through familiar and new programs that be used to address food insecurity.

To date Wake County has allocated \$555,610 of the CARES Funding to provide support for community meals provided through our partners for the period of March 14,2020 – August 31, 2020. In addition, Wake has utilized federal funding provided through the emergency enactment of the USDA Summer Food Service Program and The Farmer to Family Program to support hot meals for school children and produce boxes for food insecure individuals/families.

Meals on Wheels received CARES funding allowing the organization to remove any waiting list and add 362 clients since March 2020. Meals on Wheels has also been able to access 100 Farmer to Family produce shares each week from the Interfaith Food Shuttle.

Families have received additional direct support out of the CARES act in the form of: (Add dates here that include all periods or add specific dates for each benefit.)

- An additional \$600 unemployment benefit allotment (Mid April, 2020 – July 31st, 2020)
- \$1,200 individual credit +\$500/child benefit (Distribution began April 15<sup>th</sup>, 2020)
- Maximum amount allotment of SNAP benefits (March, April, May, June 2020)
- P-EBT program for families with children who qualify for Free & Reduced Price Lunch - \$370.50 in total P-EBT benefits per child (March 16 – May 30)

We anticipate another round of funding to become available to families in August 2020, however details of that bill are still under debate. It is expected that another allotment of \$1,200 credits will be dispersed to individuals and a potential decrease in the \$600/month unemployment benefit may occur, however these may change as the legislation goes through negotiations. The degrees of support from the next bill will have an impact on food needs of our family, thus a flexible plan is of utmost importance as we navigate uncertain waters.

## **FOOD SECURITY STRATEGIES**

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The uncertainty in resources require us to put in place a plan that is agile, efficient, and built upon regional partnerships to address the varying complex issues of food distribution. Community partners will have the opportunity to apply directly to Wake County for Covid-19 funding to address the food security strategies outlined below:



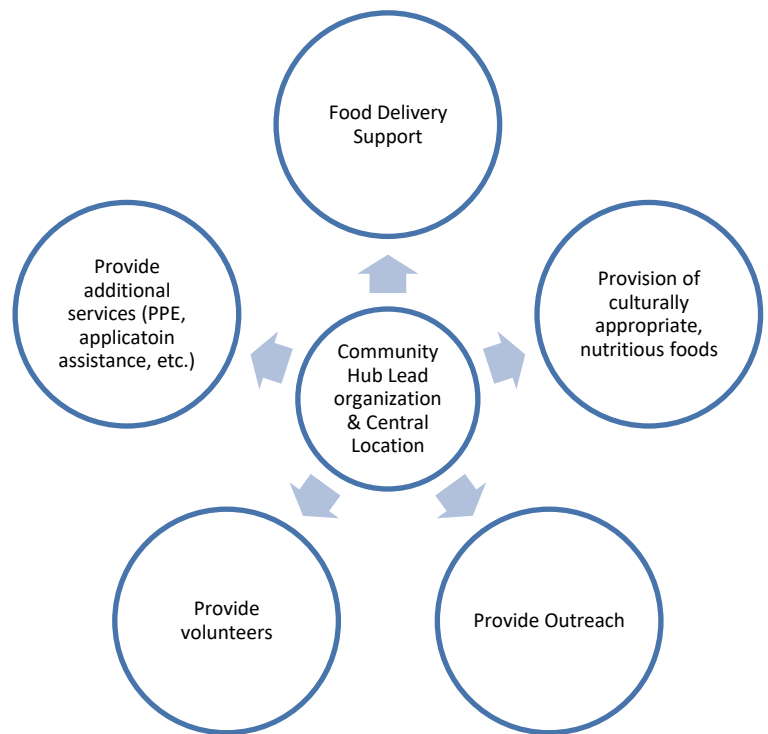
### **DEVELOP & LAUNCH REGIONAL FOOD HUBS IN FOOD INSECURE REGIONS**

to bring food and resources to food insecure communities regionally. Our community food hubs would provide a one-stop location for a food insecure individual/family to pick up 1-2 weeks-worth of food and to access additional support.

Some examples of additional supports might be provision of PPE, Chrome books and school supplies for WCPSS children, toiletries/sanitary items and WIC/SNAP/F&R application assistance. A hub would be organized by a non-profit entity who would manage procurement of food, supplies, and partners and offer bi-monthly food distribution events. The hub leader would work with other non-profit partners in the region to build effective distribution & volunteer networks for target populations or underserved areas. Additionally, the hub leader will collect and share data with the Wake County food security team. Data to be collected includes meal counts, volunteers & volunteer hours, number of boxes/pounds of produce, distribution locations, and additional services provided. The data will provide insight on the effectiveness of food relief strategies across partners and regions with a shared collection method. Regionally specific partnerships will increase opportunities for home delivery, build resilient volunteer networks, and increase access to culturally appropriate food items. We anticipate having 12-15 hub locations across the county, each with spokes reaching out into areas with gaps in food service providers, or those experiencing significant transportation barriers (e.g. Southern, Eastern, & NE Wake). The hubs will operate from September 1, 2020 – December 31, 2020. Community hub leads will provide a list of communities they intend on serving, and these would be mapped to ensure no high-needs food insecure areas are left unserved. Regional Food Security hubs will be aligned where possible with Human Service zones and will take into consideration the unique assets and challenges in each geographic area.

**GOALS OF REGIONAL FOOD HUBS:**

- Address decreases in daily meals available to community sites.
- Provide data on regional food relief efforts to inform county-wide decision making.
- Condense distributions & amount of food going out into less days to reduce volunteer needs.
- Increase access to produce & shelf stable pantry items alongside healthy recipes to give families the autonomy to cook their own meals that meet their specific dietary and cultural needs.
- Provide a one stop shop for other resources (E.G. Chrome Books for WCPSS students, SNAP Outreach, F&R Lunch Application Assistance, School Supplies, PPE, Sanitary items, etc.).
- Provide accessible locations in food insecure neighborhoods experiencing gaps in service providers.
- Provide regional pick up sites for community partners to obtain resources to deliver to nearby community members experiencing mobility and/or transportation barriers.
- Provide services that align with the needs of working families (e.g. Weekends & Evenings).
- Reduce redundancy of services in regions by encouraging partnership among regional partners (e.g. faith groups, food pantries, civic organizations, school staff, etc.).





## **ENHANCE FOOD RESOURCES FOR TARGETED POPULATIONS**

Food security is not simply about access to *any* food, it is about access to foods that are healthy, culturally appropriate, and provided in a way that meets an individual's transportation and mobility needs. The Covid-19 Food Security Strategic Plan seeks to ensure target populations such as seniors, LatinX, vegetarians, and homebound citizens have equal access to food.

### **GOALS OF TARGETED RESOURCES:**

- Reduce food waste by providing familiar food items to families from diverse backgrounds (e.g. vegetarian items, rice, masa flour, dried beans, etc.)
- Provide innovative distribution mechanisms for those who experience transportation difficulties or are homebound for health purposes.
- Ensure equitable access to food across Wake County.



## **INCREASE PANTRY, PARTNER, & FOOD BANK PURCHASING POWER & STORAGE CAPACITY TO MEET INCREASED DEMAND.**

The impacts of Covid-19 on the food system were evident by the empty store shelves in grocery stores across the nation. Our food system experienced a massive disruption as workers in processing facilities & farms fell ill and operations had to cease. Additionally, hoard buying outpaced the ability of distributors to keep shelves stocked with shelf stable items such as pasta, canned vegetables & beans, soups, and toiletry products. Our partners at both Interfaith Food Shuttle and the Food Bank of Central and Eastern NC noted the inability to access certain items, still, despite the grocery shelves seeming relatively normal once again. The supply chain has been disrupted far beyond the borders of our county, with items selling at higher prices to try and keep supply in check. Items of greatest issue continue to be meat, dairy, and eggs. It is anticipated after the season of farm gleaning and increased produce supply dies down in the fall, produce will also be more expensive to procure for both food banks and pantry partners. For food banks, food pantries, and other non-profit partners providing food to have a standing in the current market, we will need to provide financial support to increase their purchasing power. Additionally, as pantries serve more clients, the need for increased freezer and refrigeration storage capacity will also be of importance, and funding to upfit locations will help to increase overall availability of free foods around Wake County.

### **GOALS OF INCREASING PURCHASING POWER & STORAGE**

- Increase the amount of product available to food pantries in Wake County from our two local food banks.
- Provide food bank, pantry, and non-profit partners with consistent access to proteins, dairy, eggs, produce and shelf stable products.
- Assist pantries with enhancing their storage capacity for refrigerated & frozen items in order to provide a balanced supply of food for their clients.

- Provide continued support for provision of fresh produce (preferably sourced locally when possible) should the Farm to Family program discontinue.
- Expand resources to support streamlined distribution to partners across the county, including outlying areas.

## **MOVING FORWARD**

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The Covid-19 Food Security Strategic Plan covers the period of September 1, 2020 to December 31, 2020. It is expected that the needs of our community will fluctuate as we continue to navigate this unprecedented time. This plan allows for non-profits across Wake County to develop enhanced partnerships and programs that will outlast the Covid-19 CARES funding and build long-term food security teams across the county. Though Covid-19 has given us many challenges, the potential to raise awareness of hunger & bring more partners to the table is a positive outcome of this challenging time. This plan also allows the County and non-profit community to come alongside the Wake County Public School System in a manner that is both aligned and complimentary; but independent of and flexible enough to respond to fluctuations in their operation systems over the next several months.