

OCTOBER 2020

**MONTGOMERY COUNTY
FOOD COUNCIL
COVID-19 RESPONSE
UPDATE**





CONVENING PARTNERS

The COVID-19 pandemic triggered a food access crisis in Montgomery County and throughout the region, deepening inequities in our local food system as unemployment and small business closures rose, and illuminating and intensifying health disparities. Montgomery County has seen an estimated 50% increase in the number of residents accessing food assistance services, from 60,000 pre-pandemic to over 100,000 residents currently. The Food Council has been leading the response efforts, convening thousands of community partners to collaboratively and effectively address the increased need.

The Food Council convenes biweekly COVID-19 Food Security Calls with food assistance providers, elected officials, local agency representatives, faith leaders, and community advocates. Since May 15th, 2,021 total participants have joined these calls, which highlight cross-sector partnerships, and provide resources to share with residents on rental and utility assistance, family violence, census outreach, voter registration, mental wellness, and more.

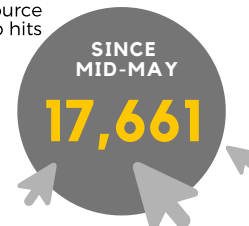
We have hosted an additional 58 meetings with local partners since mid-May, engaging a total of 4,703 food system stakeholders, and ultimately leading or participating in 304 partner and community meetings.

Our online Food Assistance Resource Map has had 17,661 hits since mid-May, including 2,535 visitors in September alone. Each week, the Food Council creates and circulates a food distribution schedule to County leadership, and since mid-May we have shared more than 300 social media posts on available food assistance resources and events to the broader community.

Social media posts sharing food assistance resources



Food Assistance Resource Map hits



ENGAGING COMMUNITY VOICES

The Food Council's Food Security Community Advisory Board (FSCAB) provides resources and training opportunities to residents who have experienced food insecurity in order to strengthen Board Members' capacity as resource navigators, advocates, and leaders in their communities. At the FSCAB's July virtual meeting, members presented highlights of their recent advocacy and outreach efforts to County Councilmember Gabe Alborno, discussed recent changes to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), including online SNAP and the Restaurant Meals Program, and addressed the food access challenges seniors are facing during the pandemic. With critical support from the Healthcare Initiative Foundation, the FSCAB has provided members with resources and connections to advocate for increased food security in their communities. For example, one FSCAB member recently worked with the County's Office of Aging and Disability to successfully resolve the challenges that one of her neighbors was experiencing with accessing meals through the Senior Nutrition Program.

"What gives my life meaning and purpose during this pandemic is the work I do with this Board."
-Dr. Rhona Reiss, FSCAB Member



DISTRIBUTING FUNDS AND ESTABLISHING RESOURCES

The Food Council is supporting the establishment of Service Consolidation Hubs across the County in partnership with the Montgomery County Government, Regional Service Center Directors, and other County partners. These Hubs serve as community-led access centers for food and other critical resources for residents and neighboring organizations, as well as a conduit for information sharing on resources, services, and food access challenges between Countywide food security initiatives and the local community. Thanks to support from Burness, the Greater Washington Community Foundation, and Washington Nationals Philanthropies, the Food Council has subgranted funds to three hubs in Mid-County and East County and five hub community partner organizations to foster collaboration and communication between local food security initiatives.

Over the past five months we have led four grant-making programs, funding over \$2.8M total in food security initiatives. The Food Council has facilitated stakeholder engagement and research, established grant funding priorities, and coordinated the application and review processes for the Food Security Task Force as well as provided technical assistance to and facilitated collaboration among grantee organizations.

- In May 2020, \$1.2M in funds were awarded to 38 organizations to support their Montgomery County food assistance distribution efforts, including \$300,000 for partnerships with local retailers to increase access to culturally-appropriate food.
- In August 2020, \$1.3M was awarded to 28 local Food Assistance Providers to improve their infrastructure and expand their capacity to provide food access in hard-to-reach communities in the County during the response to and recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The Farm to Food Bank program was launched in July in partnership with the Montgomery County government and Office of Agriculture, Manna Food Center, and the Greater Washington Community Foundation, which has enabled the food security network to purchase over \$100,000 in produce from local farms, at fair market rates, which is distributed through the County's food assistance network. This partnership has recently allocated more than \$236,000 in grants to 22 local farms to increase production capacity for Summer 2021.
- A Resident and Community Food Production Gardening Grant program was launched in October, which will allocate \$160,000 in funds to increase resident access to yard, patio, and community gardening supplies, space, and education.

Estimated produce to be purchased from local farmers:

135,000+ lbs



Funds for Farm to Food Bank Capacity Building Grants:

\$ 236,804

Investments to support culturally appropriate food access and food assistance capacity building:

\$ 2.4 MILLION



BUILDING CAPACITY

To support organizational capacity building across the food system, the Food Council has hosted a series of virtual trainings for food assistance providers during the Fall of 2020 on topics such as SNAP Basics, Culturally Competent Community Engagement and Outreach, Safe Operation of Emergency Food Distributions, and Nutrition Education. 100% of participants have noted that they would recommend these trainings to others.

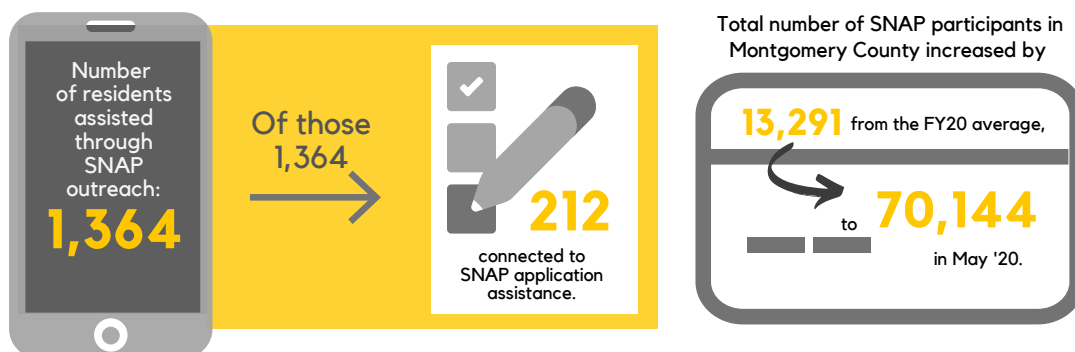
EXPANDING THE IMPACT OF FEDERAL BENEFITS PROGRAMS

By facilitating the expansion of Double Dollar funds at local farmers markets, the Food Council promotes increased use of SNAP and WIC Farmers Market Nutrition Program benefits, both of which serve as a critical resource for food insecure County residents in accessing nutritious food produced by local small businesses. County funds invested in the Maryland Market Money program were nearly tripled for Summer 2020, allowing the program to expand to new markets, apply to additional programs beyond SNAP, and increase the per-customer and per-market cap on program use.

We also collaborated with the County's Department of Health and Human Services to expand the Summer SNAP for Children Program to more than double the funds invested in this new program.

The Food Council supported increased Senior SNAP participation in Maryland by scheduling SNAP application assistance interviews by phone for Maryland residents, and sharing food assistance resources with partners serving the senior population. Members of our Food Security Community Advisory Board (FSCAB) and outreach workers recruited through a partnership with Identity have conducted bilingual outreach in English and Spanish, making phone calls to Maryland residents seeking information regarding SNAP assistance and resources, and connecting residents with application assistance through Maryland Hunger Solutions.

The Food Council has also led advocacy efforts at the County, State, and Federal levels, engaging and educating legislators and community partners about food security issues and initiatives, and advocating for policies and programs that will expand food access and sustainability in our communities.






STRATEGIC PLANNING

The Food Council, with financial support from the Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services and County Council, has served as the County's lead nonprofit partner in coordinating the Food Security Task Force's innovative food access strategies, including:

- Purchase discounted rice, beans, and lentils (an estimated **40,000 pounds per week**) from local suppliers, repackaging the large bags into family-sized containers and distributing to local residents through over 10 nonprofits around the County.
- Distribute up to **22,000 boxes of produce per week** (totaling half a million pounds), including the emergency sourcing of \$200,000 of additional produce for two weeks in June to fill an unexpected disruption in the supply chain.
- Deliver roughly **2,000 dairy boxes and 9,000 half-gallons of milk each week** to food assistance partners, which led to a partnership with Alcoholic Beverage Services (ABS) for using existing infrastructure, storage space, and transportation by leveraging the ABS warehouse and ABS trucks.
- Provide **996 daily meals** (Monday through Friday) to seniors in 11 buildings.



Expanding the capacity of service hubs to reach
265+
households per week.



Supporting the distribution of
533,850 lbs
of food per week to residents.

The Food Council has established workgroups that have convened 100+ community partner organizations in creating and implementing new Countywide strategies to:

- Expand outreach and enrollment in SNAP, WIC, and other benefits programs;
- Implement data collection, analysis, and communication to better understand food access barriers and the impact of COVID-19 on resident food security; and
- Increase resident access to home and community gardening education and opportunity.

Thanks to the generosity of our funders, we are leading the collaboration of 300+ partners and stakeholders to overcome the food access challenges in Montgomery County exacerbated by COVID-19.

There is still work to be done, and we look forward to continued opportunities to work together to fight growing hunger rates in Montgomery County.



The Lois and Richard England Family Foundation

