

COVID-19 EMERGENCY FOOD ASSISTANCE PROVIDER CAPACITY BUILDING GRANTS

Report on Key Findings
and Impact

FALL 2021

Prepared by the
Montgomery County
Food Council



Executive Summary

This report summarizes the COVID-19 Emergency Food Assistance Provider Capacity Building Grants, including their impact, key findings, and metrics. This grant program, which was created and administered through a partnership of the Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services, the Montgomery County Food Council, the Healthcare Initiative Foundation, and the Greater Washington Community Foundation, was designed to improve the ability of food assistance organizations to respond to food insecurity caused or exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic through investments in infrastructure.

Funding for this program, totalling \$1,126,100, was made available under the Federal CARES Act as appropriated by the Montgomery County Executive and County Council, the Community Food Rescue mini-grants program, and the private philanthropic donations through the Food for Montgomery Fund at the Greater Washington Community Foundation. The County's Office of Emergency Management and Homeland Security formed the County's Food Security Task Force, comprised of cross-sector leaders, community stakeholders, and food system experts to make sure public and private resources would be deployed strategically.

In total, the Task Force vetted and selected 28 community organizations to receive these grants based on requests that prioritized storage, transportation, technology, and the ability of the organization to increase the number of individuals and households served. Grants were



Women Who Care Ministries prepares supplies for a food delivery outing. Source: Women Who Care Ministries Grant Report.

administered under the fiscal sponsorship of the Healthcare Initiative Foundation, which managed the grant process and grant award distribution.

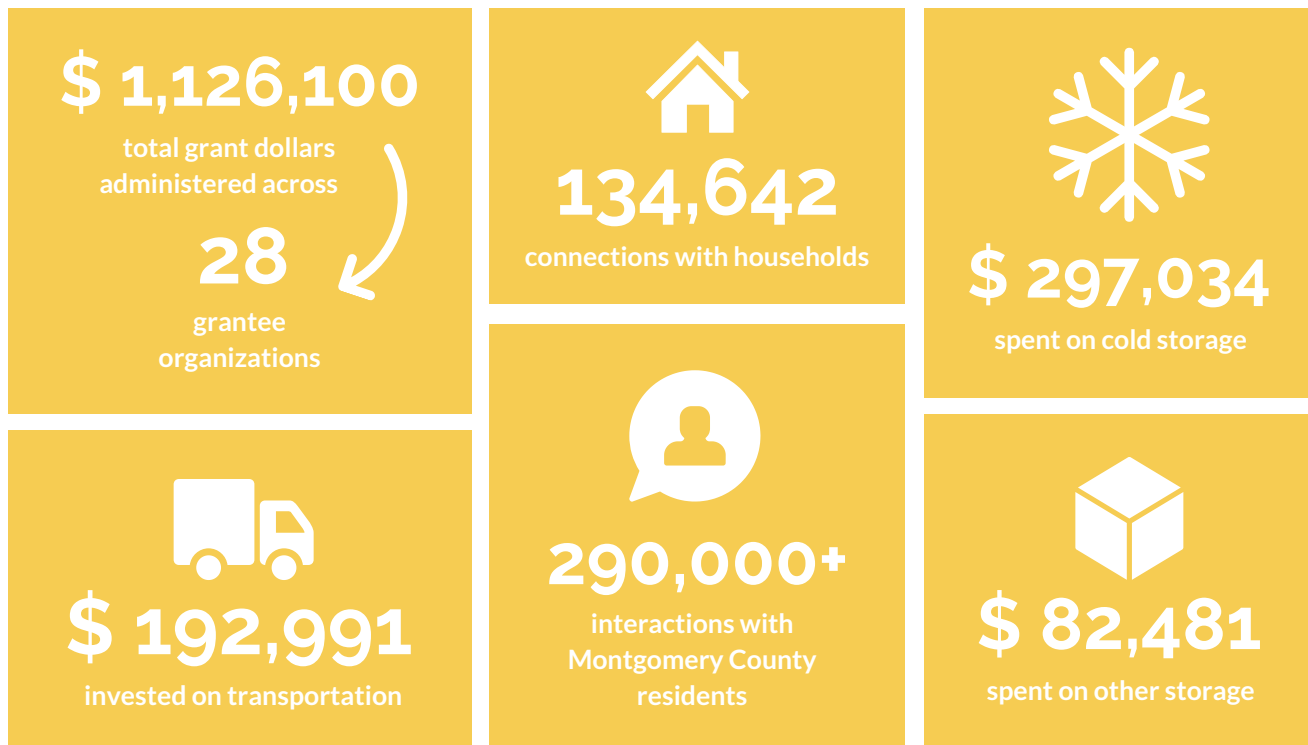
As a result of the investments made through this program, the 28 community-based initiatives directly increased food access through over 290,200 interactions with Montgomery County residents during the COVID-19 pandemic. From August 2020 through January 2021, grantees invested in materials and equipment to increase cold and dry storage capacity, improve the efficiency and safety of operations at food distribution sites, enhance technology capabilities, and provide access to additional transportation resources.



Ensuring staff safety with reflective vests at Liberty Grove United Methodist Church. Source: Liberty Grove United Methodist Church Grant Report

By strategically deploying public and private philanthropic resources to address this need, these grants enabled the nonprofits to significantly increase the amount of food they could store and process, support volunteers in healthy and safe working environments, empower partners to reach more isolated communities through food deliveries, and improve their ability to track and analyze data. These investments also allowed the grantees to forge partnerships with other organizations, enhance connections with their communities, and plan for sustainable operations in the future.

Highlighted Metrics



Through this grant program, organizations invested in a wide variety of infrastructure and equipment. This WordCloud represents the variety of purchases made. The size of the word indicates how many organizations purchased each piece of equipment. The larger the word, the higher the number of organizations.

Challenges and Key Findings

The COVID-19 pandemic created an immediate and dramatic rise in the number of individuals needing access to emergency food resources. Food assistance providers in Montgomery County stood ready to meet these new demands but faced operational challenges due to the pandemic. They needed to transport higher volumes of food from suppliers while making more deliveries of food to community members isolated by the virus. They needed a way to store perishable food safely so they could offer their clients a variety of fresh produce, protein and dairy items. While pivoting to achieve these changes, food assistance providers also needed to quickly adjust operational safety protocols to protect staff, volunteers and clients against the transmission of the virus. In order to maximize impact, these organizations also needed increased technological capabilities, in particular to collect data and support their operational planning.

The Capacity Building Grants allowed these organizations to overcome these and other challenges to meet the needs of the community. In the words of **Kingdom Fellowship African Methodist Episcopal Church**, these grants “improved the efficiency of our operations, providing greater mobility and flexibility in our food distributions.” With these funds, food assistance providers could invest in the vehicles, storage and various equipment needed to ramp up operations and support staff and volunteers. With updated technology, they could better track the needs of the community and their ability to respond to them. Beyond meeting the immediate needs of individuals experiencing food insecurity in the County, food assistance providers also used these grants to invest in their plans for the future. Several organizations built stronger networks of partnerships through collaboration and found new strategies to connect in a more meaningful way with their community. These key successes in grant funding implementation are highlighted in the thematic areas addressed below.

1 Transportation

To fight the rising food insecurity caused by COVID-19, food assistance organizations needed to move more food throughout the entire distribution process. The Capacity Building Grants enabled organizations to procure larger quantities of food from wholesalers and food banks, move food more efficiently to and within the food distribution sites, and deliver more food directly to individuals through investment in transportation. As a result, food assistance providers were not only able to serve more people, they were able to reach people who were isolated or unable to travel during the pandemic.

Transportation Investments Supporting Increased Supplies of Food

- ▶ **Women Who Care Ministries** was able to purchase a 14-foot box truck, which allowed them to “do more in less time” by eliminating multiple trips to the wholesale stores.
- ▶ **Carribean Help Center, Inc.** purchased a pick-up truck which enabled them to secure 6,150 pounds of food from September 2020 to January 2021.
- ▶ With the purchase of a cargo van, **So What Else Inc.** was able to open seven more distribution sites and double the number of times their team was able to reach those sites. Instead of visiting sites once per week or once per month, they were able to reach sites at least twice a week, “ensuring more families in need receive food and supplies to get them through this difficult time.”



Cargo van helps So What Else Inc. expand their service area. Source So What Else Grant Report.

Transportation Investments

Increased Home Delivery Capacity

- ▶ **Shepherd's Table** purchased a van for a new mobile meal service program called "Beyond the Table." They now serve entire populations that they could not previously reach, including those communities "that are most vulnerable and have the highest rates of food insecurity," according to Shepherd's Table.



Manna's new refrigerated van increases delivery capacity.
Source Manna Food Center Grant Report.

- ▶ **Manna Food Center** noted, "We were able to use the grant funds specifically to purchase a refrigerated van that increases our capacity to deliver food directly to those most vulnerable and have specific transportation constraints."
- ▶ **Bethesda Cares** purchased a van to deliver prepared meals to individuals experiencing homelessness throughout 13 different zip codes in Montgomery County. They also used the van to serve former clients now living in supportive housing—a population they were not able to serve prior to this grant.

2 Dry Storage

With the increase in demand for emergency relief, food assistance providers needed to expand their ability to safely store additional volumes of food. Whether this was a purchase of shelving to augment existing storage, or a move to an off-site warehouse, these investments enabled the providers to serve more individuals with a greater variety of shelf-stable products.

- ▶ The investment in additional shelving allowed **Small Things Matter** to expand its pantry and therefore collect and sort larger donations from the community.
- ▶ The **St. Camillus Church Food Pantry** noted that moving operations outdoors caused logistical challenges for food storage. Initial plans included constructing a new pantry. While they waited for construction to commence, they used grant funds to rent two storage trailers and four canopies to store and protect the 40,000 to 50,000 pounds of food received and distributed each week.
- ▶ The **Salvation Army** is installing a prefabricated structure to increase food storage on site.
- ▶ The **Indonesian American Association (IAA)** was able to increase the operational flexibility of their program and the amount of food they could process by leasing off-site warehouse storage. IAA reported, “Since the attainment of the warehouse, we were able to schedule more routine distributions and have more scheduled distribution in the works without having to worry about venue availability concerns.”

3 Cold Storage

Expanding cold storage capacity was particularly important for increasing the availability and variety of fresh produce, dairy, prepared meals, baked goods and proteins. This equipment also allowed for greater operational flexibility and extended the life of perishable items, reducing food waste. Organizations could also become more flexible in the amounts and types of food they were capable of accepting from donors because of the additional cold storage capacity.

- ▶ Cold storage investments allowed the **Guru Gobind Singh Foundation** to store more cooked meals, fresh produce, bread, milk and baked goods, which in turn led to new donation campaigns and partnerships. They could now provide prepared meals, produce, milk and bread to students receiving free and reduced meals at a local Montgomery County school. They also formed a partnership with Community Food Rescue and local farms to help get organic, freshly-grown produce to families who struggle with food insecurity.
- ▶ **Kingdom Fellowship African Methodist Episcopal Church** used its cold storage investment to provide more perishable food options, such as milk, eggs, butter, and protein with greater frequency.

"These two new partnerships have allowed us to expand our reach, as well as provide new, fresh food options that we would have previously been unable to provide."

- Guru Gobind Singh Foundation

"While we were already offering protein at our Saturday Food Distributions, we were not able to offer this option during the week. Now, with the refrigeration unit, we have increased the availability of produce, dairy and protein options at our weekly food distributions and with our mobile deliveries."

- Kingdom Fellowship African Methodist Episcopal Church



More cold storage allowed So What Else Inc. pantry clients access to fresh produce every day. Source: *So What Else Inc. Grant Report.*

- ▶ **Islamic Center of Maryland** noted that the investment in cold storage allowed them to take on a surprise donation of kale and produce mid-week to refrigerate and distribute on the weekend, and 400 pounds of minced deer meat that they could store overnight and distribute the next day.
- ▶ With the purchase of new cold storage equipment, **Damascus HELP, Inc.** not only increased capacity to store meats and other fresh foods, but repurposed its old freezer to store recovered baked goods from local markets.

- ▶ **Small Things Matter** increased its freezer capacity to be able to accept more food donations and casseroles made by community members.
- ▶ The refrigerator and freezer purchased by the **Montgomery County Muslim Center** allow the Center to meet the increased demand for food by increasing on-site capacity to store more fresh produce and poultry products.



Cold storage lends flexibility to operations at the Islamic Center of Maryland. Source: *Islamic Center of Maryland Facebook Page.*

4 Other Equipment Purchases

At the outset of the COVID-19 outbreak, all grant recipients were working hard to meet the surge of demand and the specific operational constraints caused by the pandemic, but each had unique gaps in their operational capabilities. The Capacity Building Grants allowed them to purchase a wide range of equipment to meet these individual needs.

- ▶ **Liberty Grove United Methodist Church** purchased pop-up canopies to protect staff and food during outdoor distributions. They also bought safety cones and reflective safety vests to ensure staff safety, particularly when managing heavy traffic flows during food distributions.
- ▶ **Southern Bethany Baptist Church** was able to prepare food distribution bags in advance and store them safely on tables purchased with grant funding. Additional carts and food trucks reduced the amount of manual labor necessary to serve more people in a timely manner.
- ▶ **American Diversity Group** purchased tables to allow volunteers to spread out and work, while complying with social distancing guidelines, as they boxed bulk items into individual packages. With the addition of prep tables, its 48 volunteers spent 2,221 hours and went through 12,492 grocery bags to safely repackage rice, beans, pasta, spaghetti, spaghetti sauce, tomatoes, tomato sauce, jelly, peanut butter, oil, and cereals.
- ▶ The **Guru Gobind Singh Foundation** could prepare more cooked meals with the addition of a new 6-burner stove.



More tables means more space to fill and store bags of food.

Source: Southern Bethany Baptist Church Grant Report

5 Technology Upgrades

Improvements to technological capability enabled food assistance providers to operate more efficiently, promote their services to a wider audience, improve data collection to analyze the impact of their operations on food insecurity in the County, and measure their actual capacity to serve their community beyond anticipated levels.

- ▶ **Vietnamese Americans Services, Inc.**, noted their technology investments enabled them to publicize their work more widely by generating marketing material.
- ▶ The **Chinese Culture and Community Service Center, Inc** purchased global positioning system (GPS) devices for its delivery vehicles to help track routes and ensure timely deliveries.
- ▶ The **American Diversity Group** purchased video equipment not only to disseminate information about food distributions, but also to educate clients on a wide variety of related health topics such as vaccinations, pandemic safety, and nutrition education.
- ▶ The **Adventist Community Services of Greater Washington, Inc.** reported that improving their technological capability enabled them to better record, track, and analyze the impact of their efforts.

- ▶ Since August 20, 2020, the **Rainbow Community Development Center** served a total of 8,002 households, which was a 275% increase over their initial projections. Through improvements to their information technology equipment, they were able to collect and organize more demographic data and share it more efficiently through cloud services.



Technology investments allow Rainbow Community Development to serve clients more efficiently. *Source: Rainbow Community Development Grant Report*

6 Boosting Staff and Volunteer Morale

The equipment purchased through these grants transformed the way volunteers and staff were able to perform the physical job of distributing food. Beyond the physical benefits, the availability of new and improved equipment had a palpable effect on the mental wellbeing of volunteers and staff, providing an unexpected and necessary boost to morale.

- ▶ **Islamic Center of Maryland** reported on the excitement the volunteers experienced at the sight of each new piece of equipment, noting that “Morale is important especially as we never thought we would be doing food drives for so long. So seeing essential new items come in was a happy moment.”
- ▶ **Meals on Wheels of Takoma Park and Silver Spring** also observed the direct—and unanticipated—effect of the grant funds on morale. They reported that “The infrastructure improvements covered by this grant provided improved storage and communications, and improved our ability to serve our community—exactly as expected. What we had not anticipated was the joy and peace of mind that they have brought to our staff of 6 and our 150 volunteers. I'm sure this translates to better service to our clients as well as stronger volunteer relationships.... ”

“The reduction in stress is palpable. There is a peace of mind that accompanies the changes. We knew we needed the new equipment, but were surprised to discover what a truly transformational grant this was for our small organization.”

- Meals on Wheels of Takoma Park
and Silver Spring

7 Building Capacity for the Future

Prior to COVID-19, Montgomery County had an established network of food assistance providers addressing food security in the County. The added demand created by the pandemic caused a 50% increase in the number of organizations providing these services. Whether organizations had been operating before the pandemic, or jumped into food distribution for the first time in direct response to the COVID-19 crisis, the Capacity Building Grants have helped to stabilize and sustain the work of food assistance providers in the County. Seeing the continued need for assistance, many of these organizations leveraged Capacity Grants funding to expand existing services or transform their new operation into a permanent fixture in the food security community. Building on lessons learned throughout this grant period, organizations are reporting the development of new storage systems, transportation, volunteer capacity and beyond, in ways that will make their efforts more efficient in the future. These improvements set individual organizations up for greater impact while also contributing to a more resilient food system that is better prepared for shocks and supply chain disruptions in the future.

- ▶ **So What Else Inc.** invested their grant funds on transportation, storage, and other equipment in order to build the infrastructure necessary to transform the nonprofit to a permanent full time emergency hunger relief organization.
- ▶ **The Living Legends Awards For Service to Humanity** is also planning beyond the existing COVID-19 crisis with its purchase of shelving for dry storage. Once COVID-19 restrictions are lifted, they plan to establish a permanent food pantry where food can be accessed on a regular basis by those in need.

"Previously, we believed that we would only conduct this program during the Covid-19 emergency, however, now we have the framework to continue hunger relief work permanently."

- So What Else Inc.

- ▶ **Nourish Now** is planning for the future by preparing for a move to a larger warehouse facility. The capacity building grant made this move fiscally feasible by providing Nourish Now with funding for larger cold storage equipment that will fit into its expanded footprint.
- ▶ **St. Camillus Church Food Pantry** is using the funds to permanently relocate and expand the physical space of the pantry, in an effort to address accessibility issues in receiving deliveries and food distribution. This investment will also help St. Camillus increase nonperishable food storage and cold storage in the same location.
- ▶ Other organizations used this investment in infrastructure to envision creative ways to sustain operations. **Clifton Park Baptist Church** purchased materials to build a 21ft. by 21ft. greenhouse. This forward-thinking project will allow them to create a sustainable source of fresh produce for community residents even if future funding sources diminish.



Greenhouses at Clifton Park Baptist Church will provide fresh produce for years to come.
Source: Clifton Park Baptist Church Grant Report.

8 Forming New Partnerships

Investments in infrastructure allowed organizations to establish more and deeper connections within the food security network in Montgomery County. Through these partnerships, organizations expanded access to additional resources. These partnerships led to tangible benefits such as improved access to food resources and unanticipated funding opportunities.

- ▶ **King and Priest's Court International Ministries** reported, "Our credibility in the food security industry in Montgomery County and the surrounding regions has increased tremendously due to this grant. Our organization has now developed a strong partnership with Manna Food Center, they can freely donate food items to us without any hesitation about food storage capacity."
- ▶ **Adventist Community Services of Greater Washington, Inc.** was able to reach more individuals in need through a partnership with the DC Area Diaper Bank. New clients who were coming to the center for the first time for diapers also became food clients.
- ▶ **Up 2 Us Foundation** partnered with Westfield Mall in Wheaton "which would not have been possible without the capacity building grant," Up 2 Us Foundation reported. Uniball-Rodamco-Westfield, the parent company that owns the mall, waived the rent and only charged property tax, water, heating, ventilation, air and fire detection services.



New partnerships mean reaching more individuals in need.
Source: Adventist Community Services of Greater Washington Grant Report.

9 Connection to Community

The impact of this funding on grantee organizations and the community far exceeded financial support and infrastructure enhancements. The greater visibility afforded to these organizations through the investment in these organizations' infrastructure led to greater visibility of their services and increased community outreach. The grants enabled these organizations to serve more residents, and ultimately to establish deeper and more direct connections with a broader population of residents, including individuals experiencing increased isolation as a result of the pandemic.

- ▶ **Chinese Culture and Community Center** reported on several donations received from the public through their website. Even though the amounts were modest, they came from individuals “showing their gratitude and appreciation of the food delivery service we are providing....[W]e feel satisfied, blessed, and worthy after receiving these donations, which pushes us to provide better services to more people in the future.”



Capacity Building Grants help Shepherd's Table reach vulnerable communities. Source Shepherd's Table Facebook Page

- ▶ Through the expanded service brought about by their capacity building grant, **Vietnamese American Services, Inc. (VAS)** became aware of the isolation felt by many seniors during lockdown and responded by starting a senior social club. VAS reported that "There were only 50 participants when the club first opened to the seniors, and now the number of participants has increased to 95 seniors, with over 70 households in Montgomery County. This outcome is much more than what VAS anticipated prior to establishing the club."
- ▶ Increased capacity to serve has also meant forging greater connections with the community for **Southern Bethany Food Pantry**, which expressed gratitude to its neighbors for their support and made special mention of one client who would come to the pantry for food on a weekly basis, and who now volunteers to distribute the food bags (which were purchased through the Grant program) to others in need.

Conclusion

Thanks to the private philanthropic donations from Food for Montgomery and the CARES Act dollars allocated by the County, the COVID-19 Emergency Food Assistance Provider Capacity Building Grants allowed organizations to respond to the immediate and dramatic increase in food insecurity brought on by the pandemic. The purchases of equipment and other infrastructure improvements had an immediate and concrete effect on food assistance providers' efficiency and capacity for safe operations. Grant funds also provided the necessary support to expand the reach of food distribution to previously isolated communities, and allowed for better data collection and analysis of impact. Just as important were the intangible benefits from these infrastructure improvements: they provided a foundation for future planning, improved the morale of hard-working volunteers, bolstered partnerships and increased collaboration, and fostered human connections to combat the pandemic's isolating effect on our community.



The Capacity Building Grants have helped to sustain future operations at Food Assistance organizations. Source: *So What Else, Inc. Grant Report*.

Grantees

Adventist Community Services of Greater Washington, Inc. (\$39,425)

American Diversity Group (\$57,396)

Bethesda Cares (\$38,403)

Carribean Help Center, Inc (\$20,000)

Chinese Culture and Community Service Center, Inc. (\$20,000)

Clifton Park Baptist Church (\$64,146)

Damascus HELP Inc. (\$3,000)

Guru Gobind Singh Foundation (\$26,475)

Indonesian American Association (\$23,200)

Islamic Center of Maryland (\$40,000)

Kingdom Fellowship African Methodist Episcopal Church (\$57,803)

KINGS & PRIESTS COURT INT'L MINISTRIES INC. (\$71,721)

Liberty Grove United Methodist Church (\$1,075)

Manna Food Center (\$50,000)

Meals on Wheels of Takoma Park and Silver Spring (\$22,000)

Montgomery County Muslim Foundation (\$6,913)

Nourish Now (\$85,000)

Rainbow Community Development Center (\$67,409.73)

Shepherd's Table (\$26,000)

Small Things Matter (\$2,730)

So What Else, Inc. (\$85,000)

Southern Bethany Baptist Church (\$12,041)

St Camillus Church Food Pantry (\$60,570)

The Living Legends Awards for Service to Humanity (\$20,000)

The Salvation Army (\$85,000)

UP 2 US FOUNDATION (\$79,347)

Vietnamese Americans Services, Inc (\$9,135)

Women Who Care Ministries (\$52,311)