

# 'It has changed our world.'



Food Access Raises Everyone

## The Impact of COVID-19 on Cleveland's Food System

### Identifying Community Needs and Gaps in the Current Response

The Food Access Raises Everyone (FARE) Project supports and connects community residents and organizations working on food access and other factors that impact health in the neighborhoods suffering from the highest disparities in Cleveland and Cuyahoga County.

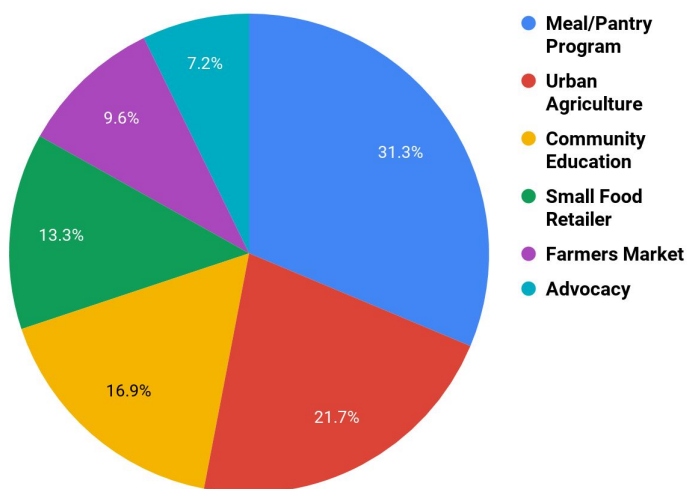
As communities across Cleveland began to experience the public health and economic impacts of COVID-19, FARE and its advisors saw tremendous value in having community leaders on the frontlines identify the critical needs and gaps in their communities. Through interviews with partners and community advisors, FARE wanted to examine the current response to the pandemic through a health equity lens; **see how it's functioning at the community level, who it's serving, what the actual needs and assets are, and where resources would be most impactful.** FARE also wanted to look beyond the big relief initiatives being proposed and funded, and identify opportunities for proactive, targeted investment and projects to pursue that would have a systems-level impact beyond a single organization and across a network or neighborhood.

**FARE conducted 32 interviews with partners between April 7th and 21st** including corner store owners; community leaders; educators; small business owners; community gardeners; faith based organizations; and managers of food pantries, hot meal programs, homeless support services, workforce development programs, farmers market managers. They represent seven municipalities and 14 different Cleveland neighborhoods, east and west side, with a concentration of partners whose work focuses on Central-Kinsman and Clark-Fulton. Leaders identified where resources would be most impactful in addressing critical and immediate needs such as food security as well as emerging issues that will impact their communities in the months ahead.

#### Communities Represented

- City of Cleveland
  - Central-Kinsman
  - Clark-Fulton
  - Hough
  - Ohio City
  - Old Brooklyn
  - Glenville
  - Stockyards
  - Bellaire-Puritas
  - Fairfax
  - Harvard
  - Cudell
- Detroit Shoreway
  - Slavic Village
  - St Clair-Superior
- East Cleveland
- Cleveland Heights
- South Euclid
- Bedford Heights
- Euclid
- Maple Heights

### Food Systems Stakeholder Interviews by Type



During the interviews common themes emerged about the needs, gaps, and assets. They have been organized by type of food access point i.e. food pantry or grocery store, along with specific recommendations for how providers and funders can leverage their resources and influence to expand community capacity and address the growing demand for these critical community needs now and in the future. **Many of these grassroots initiatives address multiple determinants of health and have needs that are not being met by the organizations currently being funded by rapid response grantmaking.** To address these systems level issues, it will require local funders to solicit different types of proposals or work with funded organizations to

pivot to address these real gaps and needs in the system for a more coordinated, sustainable and equitable response.

Many neighborhood networks are fractured and organizations disconnected, preventing a comprehensive response that would distribute resources more equitably and effectively. FARE is now interviewing key leaders in a few different neighborhoods to better understand what these community networks of residents, grassroots organizations, and institutions need to better collaborate and coordinate their efforts to position them to address the current urgent needs as well as those that will continue to emerge as the pandemic's economic impact will ripple across the region for several months, even years, to come.

*I connect with other partners and learn more information that I can share with other people. I am willing to help and give the best of me to help people feel human.*

**- Clark-Fulton Resident**



### Food Pantries and Hot Meal Programs

**High Demand for Emergency Food and a Surge in New Clients:** 100% of partners said they are experiencing more demand than they can meet with current funding and volunteers. Many programs reported one third of the people they're serving are first-time clients.

**Lack of Volunteers Leads to Pantry and Meal Program Closures:** Many programs are staffed by volunteers over 60 and older, a population particularly vulnerable to COVID-19. Some partners estimated that over 30% of local pantry and meal programs have closed due to lack of volunteers.

**Centralized Food Distributions Can Create Inequities:** The Greater Cleveland Food Bank has organized massive drive-thru food distributions to help address the need when many of their partner agencies had to close. This leaves many food insecure families without internet access to register and those without cars, unable to receive emergency food through these channels.

**Major Expansion of Home Delivered Meals and Food Boxes:** The number of partners interviewed offering home delivery of meals and food boxes has doubled since the pandemic to get food to Cleveland's most vulnerable residents and families without transportation.

**Lack of PPE and Supplies for Frontline Volunteers:** Program organizers don't have access to resources they need i.e. masks, gloves, disinfectants, sanitizer to protect their volunteers and clients.

**Coordination of Community Partners is Critical:** Neighborhood coordination of emergency food resources supports a comprehensive response that equitably serves our most vulnerable populations. In Central-Kinsman, this crisis has brought resident leaders and community partners together to coordinate meal deliveries, food distributions, and provision of other basic needs. In other communities, the lack of coordination and inaccurate information has led to overlap and redundancies in services with multiple food distributions in the same community within days of each other.

*Things will get better after Covid 19 but we need to build equitable connections with other organizations to support people in various communities. Grassroots organizations and community members are building support for one another with limited resources and we are getting it done. Let's continue this work beyond the pandemic because the people need it and we see it can be done.*

**- Hot Meal Program Coordinator**

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Provide funding to increase the capacity of local food pantries and meal programs**, who have the ability to tailor their programs to the most vulnerable members of their communities.
- **Fund stipends to recruit, train and support volunteers** (younger volunteers and people who may be out of work) to provide critical capacity to these programs to maintain their regular hours, expand to meet demand, and reopen, creating a more resilient food safety net.
- **Fund and expand home delivery and neighborhood distributions** by providing gas cards and volunteer stipends for community members to develop delivery networks that bring food to those who are most vulnerable and risk falling through the cracks of the current system.
- **Provide funding for an intermediary organization like MedWish to purchase PPE in bulk** and distribute to frontline grassroots organizations, in addition to healthcare and first responders.
- **Invest in neighborhood-based coordination of emergency food services and providers** to ensure resources are equitably distributed and gaps in services are addressed.



## Small Independent Grocers and Corner Stores

**High Demand at Small Grocers and Corner Stores:** Stores that have stayed open are seeing increases in customers and purchases, up 25% than before the pandemic.

**COVID-19 Leads to Store Closings:** Other stores have made the difficult decision to close. A local food entrepreneur reported that 5 of the 7 corner stores she provides products to have closed. Many of these stores are one of the few food access points in their communities. If they close permanently, there will be major impacts for residents in that neighborhood.

*I am passionate about my business and my work, my customers and helping my community.*

**-East Cleveland Corner Store Owner**

**High Wholesale Food Prices and Limited Access to PPE:** Food distributors are focusing on their larger clients like supermarkets where demand is high. Small food retailers are dealing with record high wholesale prices and order limits for basic groceries like milk, eggs and bread. They are also unable to regularly stock disinfectants, masks, gloves, and wipes for customers and employees.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Provide bridge grants to small store owners** so they can purchase the grocery and PPE inventory they need to serve the residents in their community during the crisis.
- **Provide funding to a few trusted store owners to organize and convene small food retailers;** identify what they need to survive in this new, ever changing environment, explore cooperative purchasing, and how they can be a part of a larger food access network in partnership with pantries and meal programs in their neighborhoods.
- **Provide funding for an intermediary organization like MedWish to purchase PPE in bulk** and distribute to small food retailers so they can comply with State of Ohio's PPE requirements.



## Farmers Markets

**Farmers Markets Continue to Operate:** Farmers markets and farm stands have been included as an essential business by the State of Ohio and all markets that are currently open have continued to operate. It is not clear how COVID-19 will impact the markets that have yet to open this season, especially those that are part of organizations with a variety of programs.

**Increase in Customers and SNAP Purchases:** All markets reported an increase in the number of customers coming to their markets. Since March 1st SNAP sales at local farmers markets are up 50% compared to last year. Produce Perks Midwest is offering unlimited matching for SNAP purchases at farmers markets through June 30th.

**Uncertain Future for WIC Perks and PRx Programs:** Due to organizational constraints, it is unclear if the Produce Prescription or WIC Perks program will operate this year. Healthcare partners have moved most visits to telemedicine platforms making monthly PRx counselling visits and voucher distribution challenging.

**Physical Distancing Measures Impact Market Operations:** All markets have discontinued in-person nutrition education and cooking demos; increased space between vendors; built handwashing stations; monitor the number of customers in the market at one time; ask their vendors to wear masks and gloves; and don't allow customers to select their own produce.

### FARMERS MARKETS IN OPERATION

**Coit Road Farmers Market**  
East Cleveland

**Shaker Square Farmers Market**  
Cleveland

**Crocker Park Farmers Market**  
Westlake

**Good Earth Farm Stand**  
Cleveland

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Provide funding to expand Produce Perks Midwest's unlimited match beyond June 30th** through the rest of the market season - connecting new customers to these important sources of fresh produce in their community and supporting local small businesses.
- **Provide seed funding for the North Coast Farmers Market Collective** to regularly convene all the partners in their network, identify and advocate for their needs, share best practices and resources in response to the pandemic and ensure these markets survive this season.



## Urban Agriculture

**High Demand for Gardening:** While urban agriculture won't be able to meet the demand for all the fresh fruits and vegetables in Cleveland, it offers a unique opportunity for social connection and community building. There is surging interest in home and community gardening as families look for activities that honor physical distancing and supplemental sources for fresh produce. Businesses providing products and services to local gardeners, like Rust Belt Riders, can't keep up with demand.

*I believe my role is to get good food to good people and the education that's needed. We are small enough to be flexible to make changes in real time and meet community needs.*

**- Urban Grower and Educator**

**Lack of Safe Practices for Community Gardening:** Many of Cleveland's community gardeners don't have clear guidelines for operating community gardens during the pandemic. Over 50% of Cleveland's

garden leaders are over the age of 61 and a majority of the 3400+ community gardeners are African-American. Two populations that are particularly vulnerable to COVID-19.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- **Fund stipends for local volunteers** to assist community gardens with maintenance, support for senior gardeners, and technical advice and guidance for new gardeners.
- **Provide funding to create a gleaning network** linking urban farms and community gardens to food pantries and hot meal programs, increasing access to fresh produce in local communities.
- **Public health agencies should develop and disseminate guidelines for best practices for urban agriculture** that prevent the spread of COVID-19. These guidelines should be updated regularly and shared with community garden leaders and urban farmers throughout Cuyahoga County.



## Critical, Emerging Needs and Recommendations for Action

**Grassroots Organizations Are Nimble, Responsive and Addressing Multiple Needs:** Many of the partners interviewed work specifically on food access but found themselves pivoting, to respond to other community needs from the distribution of hygiene products and school supplies to home delivery of meals and prescription medications. Combined, this network of 30+ community leaders and organizations estimated that they could regularly serve an additional 9,310 community residents with an investment of \$128,700 in grant funds.

*There is a lot more we need to do, now more than ever. We have been called upon to provide emergency assistance and in-depth case management work that we had not been funded to do. We have adapted quickly with the resources we have.*

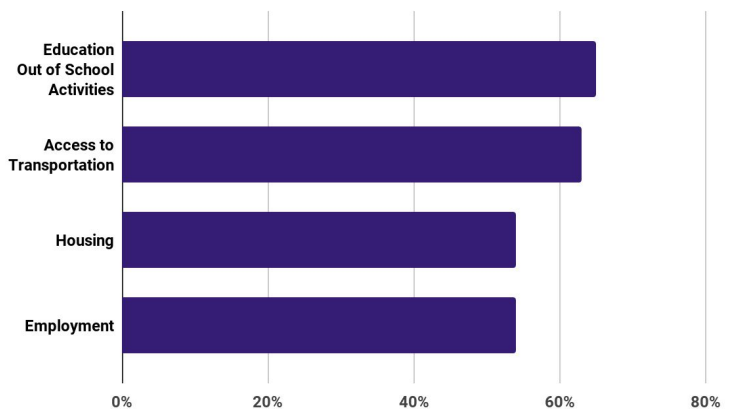
**-Local Refugee Services Organization**

**Food Access is Just the Beginning:** The three needs beyond food access these partners hear most from community members are **Education; Transportation; Housing and Employment issues.** Other determinants of health that ranked high on the list of concerns included mental and behavioral health, drug and alcohol abuse; employment, and loss of community connection.

Many of their immediate needs for supplies were not food related but the resources required to safely offer services and address their community's other critical issues (ranked by order of importance);

1. Masks, gloves, sanitizer, and disinfectants
2. School supplies and activities for youth
3. Food containers and gas cards for community residents to deliver food
4. Hygiene products and baby supplies

Top Needs Identified by Community Members





When asked to share their single greatest need in helping their community, they shared the following:

1. Funding (40%)
2. Sharing and Coordination of Accurate Information (16%) & Youth Activities and Supplies (16%)
3. Volunteers (9%)

**Funders Need to Invest in and Encourage Collaboration and Coordination of Services:** During this pandemic, many organizations are operating in isolation and developing programs that are not informed by identification of the highest needs in their communities. It is also clear that the economic impact of the pandemic will affect our community for months and maybe years to come. The COVID-19 Rapid Response Fund and other funders can play a key role ensuring equitable and sustainable use of resources:

- **Prioritize funding for grantees who collaborate** with other providers and grassroots leaders to coordinate services and resources, providing equitable access to all residents and stakeholders
- **Invest in grassroots community leaders and projects on the frontlines of the crisis** who are already working on these critical issues, who have clear understanding of the needs and gaps in their communities, know how to share information effectively with residents, and the connections and trusted relationships with their communities to expand impact.
- **Ask grantees and other organizations to use and promote information hubs** like Cleveland Pandemic Response as the place for community members and organizations to find accurate information on basic needs, coordinate services, and share resources and request volunteers.

*I understand the need for emergency response but we need to organize a grassroots model that develops a local food preparedness network and invests in people.*

**-Community Leader**

**Provide Funding and Support for Youth Programs and Activities:** Several of those interviewed mentioned their deep concern for the young people in their communities. Students are out of school until fall and all youth activities, community and recreation centers, and playgrounds are no longer available. They report increasing violence and tension in their communities and don't see any focus or resources to support youth coming into their neighborhoods.

*Kids are fighting because they have nothing to do. We have to provide something for kids in the community. They close down everything in the community and expect the community to practice social distancing when our spaces are so small. Children need some place to go or things will only get worse.*

**- Central-Kinsman Community Leader**

**Limited Organizational Capacity Will Continue to Impact Programs in the Future:** Many organizations have lost their core volunteer base and/or restricted work hours; program spending; and community-based programming. Others are facing severe shortfalls in fundraising capacity this year as their traditional strategies are unable to accommodate physical distancing.

**Thank you to all of our partners who took the time to talk with us and share their experiences!**

Africa House International | Building Hope in the City | Casa Alma | Cleveland Financial Centers | Cleveland Fresh | Cleveland Metropolitan Housing Authority | Cleveland Roots | Coit Road Farmers Market | Denison UCC | Eagles Market | Environmental Health Watch | Feed the Soul | Food Depot 2 Health | FreeThinkersSince87 | Freshly Rooted | Fruitalicious | Garden Valley Neighborhood House | Hayden Food Plus | Hunger Network of Greater Cleveland | Ka-La Healing Garden | Little Africa Food Co-op | Mother 2 Mothers | NOAHH | Ohio State University Extension | Rid-All and Urban Farm Doctors | Paul's Serv-Rite | Project Save | Rust Belt Riders | Stone Soup | Taking Back Our Youth | The Refugee Response

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