

# LOCAL FOOD SYSTEMS RESPONSE TO COVID

*Building Better Beyond Webinar Series*

## Emergency Food, Charity, and the Local Food System *Webinar Highlights*

### Overview

Emergency food has become an increasingly vital part of local and regional food systems with changes in consumer spending habits, closures of schools and the impact on free and reduced meal programs, and financial hardships experienced by many households. New state and local policies, along with private philanthropic dollars, have created new opportunities to enhance producers' market access while supporting access to fresh, local products by emergency and charitable food providers. This webinar focused on the evolving relationship between food banks and other emergency and charitable food service providers and the local and regional food system sectors.

### Speakers

#### **LaToya M. Meaders**

Collective Fare, Director of Operations  
<https://www.collectivefare.com/>

#### **Leandra Forman**

FoodChain, Operations Manager  
<https://foodchainlex.org/>

#### **Mary Greene-Trotters**

Spirit Lake Tribe, Director of Food Distribution Program  
<http://www.spiritlakenation.com/programs/food-distribution-program/>

### Introduction

There is a history of intentional, violent efforts to prevent the access of food to BIPOC communities (Black, indigenous, and people of color) in the United States. Colonization disrupted food pathways, which led to less nutritious food choices and barriers to access that still exist today. The COVID-19 shutdowns highlighted the gaps in our food system that already existed and exacerbated food insecurity in the United States. However, with this escalation has come recognition of the gaps in the food system by people and organizations with access to funding to invest in solutions. During the webinar, speakers discussed new and existing barriers to healthy, local food their clients faced and some creative solutions their organizations developed to address those barriers. All speakers also discussed the dignity and value that access to nutritious and culturally appropriate foods builds into communities.

## Highlights

### Overcoming Barriers

Even before COVID-19 there were many barriers to accessing emergency and charitable food. For example, emergency food access points are often prohibitive to those without reliable transportation and many food insecure people are ineligible for benefits because they lack IDs or a permanent address. However, the speakers' organizations were well placed to overcome these barriers and bridge gaps in their local food systems in new and creative ways because they knew how to access new sources of funding, had existing relationships with local food sources, and were closely connected with the needs of the community.

Existing partnerships with restaurants and farmers meant there was mutual trust to bridge the gap in the food chain and get meals to people who need them. Fresh, local produce could be sourced from farmers who lost their previous restaurant or institutional markets and sent to restaurants who were paid to prepare healthy, hot meals for those who need them. Food pantries also established programs and partnerships with emergency food recipients with access to transportation to act as an informal delivery service to provide greater access to elderly or immobile recipients who might be otherwise ineligible for benefits but need emergency food.

The speakers also discussed how the face-to-face nature of their successful distribution methods provided the opportunity for nutrition or culinary education that clients do not receive through programs like SNAP. Many programs that might provide fresh produce do not provide education on how to cook it and retain its nutritional value so that unfamiliar produce often goes to waste. Additionally, educating people on how to use fresh food, creates advocates for the availability of fresh produce and healthy choices in areas that have not offered them in the past. The personal relationship and familiarity that comes from a deliciously prepared veggie creates recognition in stores and a deeper connection to vegetables and where they come from.

### "How do you change a community? Feed them well."

Speakers affirmed that the way that food assistance is made accessible is equally as important as the food itself and emphasized the importance of honoring the agency and dignity of community members experiencing food insecurity. Community members experience food insecurity for different reasons and have different capacities and resources for preparing food. Speakers offered that for those experiencing increased social isolation due to the pandemic, such as the elderly, the provision of a thoughtfully prepared hot meal can provide care and comfort.

While shelf stable foods are an important component of emergency food efforts, community members who receive produce or other fresh foods express that receiving flavorful and healthful foods helps them feel that their happiness and wellbeing are valued by their community. Clients with consistent access to meals with fresh vegetables and prepared with health and immunity in mind find that they feel better than they did when eating food from programs that did not pay attention to things like sodium content. Additionally, providing meals that prioritize the inclusion of culturally appropriate healthy ingredients further demonstrates that clients and their specific needs are understood and valued.

To that end, the Spirit Lake Tribe offers a grocery store style food bank that is thoughtfully designed and includes fresh and culturally appropriate foods in a familiar grocery format.

Community members can visit the store as needed, which allows them to better integrate fresh foods into their diets. The other panelists also emphasized the importance of culturally appropriate foods for promoting community health, and stated that locally embedded organizations, farmers, and food entrepreneurs are best positioned to understand and serve those needs. They further suggested that local procurement of culturally appropriate foods provides entrepreneurial opportunities for limited resource producers operating at a variety of scales and furthers the growth of local food economies and self-reliance.

### Moving past a perpetual emergency

The closing reflections of the panel are well summarized in this statement from Leandra Forman, “If we societally decide that healthy, nutritious food is a human right and that those working in the food supply chain deserve a living wage, the funding is out there to make that a reality all the time, not just during an emergency.” The speakers shared their desire for a pathway beyond emergency response to addressing the deeper structural issues that cause food insecurity. Through long-term support and collaboration with community-based partners and investment in local food producers, emergency food and food security initiatives can build health and prosperity for future generations.

### Project Team



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