

COMMENTARY ON COVID-19 AND THE FOOD SYSTEM

Activating the local food system in emergency food response

**JAFSCD
Responds to
the COVID-19
Pandemic**



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Abstract

Resilient local food systems are a necessary component to keep our communities healthy, especially during times of emergency. With a history of supporting local farmers and food access in less-resourced communities, Fresh Approach was in a prime position at the time of shelter-in-place orders to pivot our efforts to emergency food relief in this time of uncertainty. By collaborating and mobilizing resources, Fresh Approach was able to strengthen existing connections with small farmers, build new relationships with other food access nonprofits, and support families in need by providing them with farm-fresh, local, and healthy produce. We outline how these partnerships and collective efforts have fortified a resilient and transformative food system in our area.

Keywords

Resilience, Collaboration, Resource Mobilization, COVID-19, Pandemic, Emergency Food Response

Between COVID-19, raging wildfires in California, the growing insurgency against the treatment of Black lives, and many other pressing issues, our food and agricultural systems have been shaken to the core in every aspect. Farmworkers, who have historically been denied acknowledgment for their immeasurable and essential contributions to our society, have been hit hard by the challenges that COVID-19 have posed; vulnerable and historically oppressed communities—migrants, senior citizens,

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lower-income communities of color, food delivery workers, and others—are struggling even more to feed themselves and their families; members of the middle class and other communities are experiencing food insecurity for the first time. Prior to the pandemic, our food system was already unjust, racist, and inequitable. COVID-19 has only exacerbated these issues and highlighted the growing need for community food systems. Supporting resilient food systems is essential to all aspects of our communities' health and well-being, especially in moments of emergency and disaster.

At Fresh Approach, we believe that a resilient food system is one that is rooted in collaboration and network-building. In normal times, our organization works to build healthy communities through food access and nutrition education programming in the Bay Area of California. With the onset of shelter-in-place orders in March, we quickly repositioned our assets and efforts to become an emergency food relief organization. Since March, the partners in our network have delivered more than 120,000 emergency fruit and vegetable boxes in seven counties to families facing increased levels of food insecurity due to the pandemic. Each of those boxes was filled with produce grown within 100 miles (161 km) from the household at which it ultimately arrived. In many cases, the food was delivered to families living no more than five miles (8 km) from the farm where it was grown. As a contractor in the USDA Farmers to Families Food Box Program, we built a grassroots and collaborative model that reached tens of thousands of households, served more than 50 nonprofit organizations, and invested US\$2.8 million into many dozens of small farms in the greater Bay Area. Our project prioritized farmers of color, women- and immigrant-owned farms, urban farms, and organic farms using climate-smart growing practices.

In most cases, the companies awarded USDA contracts were large for-profit distributors who sourced conventional products and delivered them in bulk to food banks. In our model, Fresh Approach served as a network coordinator for eight small local food system organizations that were farms, nonprofit farms, or nonprofit organizations. Utilizing a hub-and-spoke model like ours allowed for high levels of efficiency and divergent impact. Large distributors ran into delivery bottlenecks by packing massive quantities of boxes at once that not even food banks could receive; we were able to arrange smaller deliveries that directly reached existing nonprofit organizations without adding a burden to the already overwhelmed food banks. In this fashion, we were able to serve a diverse body of partners serving a wide range of families, including farmworkers in rural parts of the coast, undocumented families living in East Palo Alto, and the Eritrean refugee population in Oakland.

One mother had this to say of the box program: “I would like to thank you for the food boxes you have been delivering to my son at his apartment in Mountain View. He lives in an apartment complex for low-income adults with developmental disabilities. The quality and wonderful different types of produce have been greatly appreciated. His favorites were fruits and carrots. Such a stressful time for everyone, but I am so impressed by your thoughtful gift.”

Another benefit to our model is that it allows for a richness in mission. By collecting a group of organizations that have overlapping goals, but unique strategies to achieving them, we were able to realize a broad strengthening of the local food system. Each group brought its own local supply chains to the table as well as its own network of community organizations that could receive the boxes. Our model allowed each of the eight mini food hubs to set their own priorities: there was Sanzuma farm in San Rafael, which delivered boxes directly to the homes of COVID-19 positive families; Pie Ranch and Spade and Plow Farms used this project as a catalyst to become Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) certified; Frog Hollow Farm built a stronger relationship with its area school districts, which pledged to begin purchasing their fruit directly; Veggielution delivered its boxes door-to-door and used its boxes to build stronger community relationships; Agricultural Institute of Marin, a farmers market organization, purchased produce from the farmers at its markets to help them recover from the lost business due to

shrinking market attendance; Edible Schoolyard worked in Stockton to use their boxes to educate families about the values of eating organic; and finally, Gill Tract Farms in the East Bay directed its boxes to a network of social and racial justice organizations.

In times of emergency, we are quick to look to food banks for relief. And it is true; food banks are the most efficient system to distribute food to families struggling to put any on the table. However, when COVID-19 hit, food banks were hit extremely hard; at the same time they saw a skyrocketing need, they had to suspend distribution through many of their normal channels due to shelter-in-place restrictions. Our project demonstrates that with a little bit of centralized support, local farms can be activated as emergency food responders in as little time as food banks. To achieve this, we do not need to build anything new; we only need to direct more resources to local farmers. Local farms are resilient by nature. A resilient food system is one that builds linkages between those farms and allows them to set their own course.

