



City of Seattle COVID-19 Emergency Food Response

MARCH 2020 – MARCH 2021

City of Seattle Emergency Feeding Taskforce
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Dear Partners,

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit our region in March 2020, continuing and expanding efforts to help individuals and families keep food on the table was a top priority. The pandemic caused and exacerbated several overlapping dynamics that impacted food systems and food security. The social distancing and closures required to mitigate the spread of the virus meant food and meal providers had to rapidly pivot operations to serve clients safely. Business closures also caused higher rates of unemployment, resulting in increased food insecurity and higher demand for food and economic assistance. In response, multiple City of Seattle departments and stakeholders came together to ensure that those most impacted by the pandemic had immediate access to nutritious, culturally relevant food. As the pandemic stretched from weeks to months, the City team and Seattle's food and nutrition providers continued to assess and respond to needs with a focus on older adults, low-income families and children, communities of color, immigrants and refugees, and unsheltered communities.

While the COVID-19 crisis and response continue, we want to take a moment to look back on the services provided during the first year. We are deeply grateful for, and humbled by, the community partners who directly served people food and meals every day, and for the agencies and organizations that provided systems support, grants, and more in a collaborative response to community needs.

The City of Seattle is proud to be part of this food security ecosystem. From March 2020–March 2021, we directed millions in federal, state and city funds to provide Seattle residents with access to meals, food, and direct assistance. A significant portion of these investments supported an emergency grocery voucher program, which the City set up within the first weeks of the pandemic and grew to serve more than **14,000 households** with seven months of grocery assistance. In other efforts, over **one million additional meals** were served to individuals experiencing or transitioning out of homelessness, and nearly another **one million meals** were served to older adults. Seattle Public Schools set up 40 meal sites and several meal delivery options that the City supplemented with more than **83,000 bags of fresh produce, 9,000 holiday meals, and food backpacks to an additional 1,800 students** each weekend. Food banks received **new grants** to address increased costs caused by the need to alter their service models and to meet increased demand. **Twenty-five community groups** received a total of nearly \$2 million to support efforts such as providing culturally appropriate meals for older adults, running pop-up food sites, supporting urban agriculture and community gardening, and collaborating with culturally relevant restaurants to get hot meals to vulnerable communities.

This report details these and other COVID-19 hunger response activities. It has been a privilege to work alongside our community partners to meet the needs of this crisis. As we move toward recovery, we look forward to continued collaboration to create a more food secure future for our city.

Sincerely,



Michelle Caulfield
Interim Director
Office of Sustainability & Environment



Helen Howell
Interim Director
Human Services Department

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Acknowledgements

The following partners distributed or received city, state or federal funding and resources focused on providing emergency food assistance in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The City of Seattle was proud to partner with these organizations as well as the countless groups across the city that distributed personal protective equipment and adjusted programming to continue serving households.

Afghan Health Initiative	Filipino Community of Seattle (FCS)	Plant Based Food Share
American Polynesian Organization	First Tongan Senior Nutrition	Providence Regina House
AMpowering	Food is Love Project	Public Health – Seattle & King County
API Chaya	Food Lifeline	Puget Sound Labor Agency
Asian Counseling and Referral Service	Foundation for Sustainable Community (DBA	Queen Anne Food Bank
Atlantic Street Center	Farmer Frog)	Queer the Land
Auburn Senior Center	Got Green	Rainier Valley Food Bank
Backpack Brigade	Greater Maple Valley Community Center	Rainier Valley Midwives
Ballard Food Bank	Harvest Against Hunger	RAVE Foundation
Black & Tan Hall	Hip Hop is Green	Refugee Women's Alliance
Black Diamond Community and Senior Center	Horn of Africa Services (HOAS)	Restore and Repair Missionary Outreach
Black Farmers Collective	Hunger Intervention Program	Salvation Army
Black Star Farmers (BSF)	Immanuel Community Services	Seattle Animal Shelter
Blessed Sacrament Church	Ingersoll Gender Center	Seattle Food Committee
Byrd Barr Place	International Community Health Services	Seattle Indian Center
Casa Latina	Issaquah Senior Center	Seattle Public Schools
Catholic Community Services of Washington	Jewish Family Service	Society of St. Vincent de Paul
Central Area Senior Center	King County Department of Natural Resources and Parks	Solid Ground Washington
Central Area Youth Association	King County Metro	Somali Family Safety Task Force
Chief Seattle Club	King County Office of Emergency Management	Somali Health Board
Coalition of Immigrants, Refugees and Communities of Color (CIRCC)	Kirkland Senior Center	Sound Generations
Colored Girls Garden Club	Korean Women's Health Services	South Park Senior Center
Community Passageways	Lake City Collective	Southeast Seattle Senior Center
Councilmember Lisa Herbold	Lifelong	The Food Bank @ St. Mary's
Cultivate South Park	Mary's Place	Tilth Alliance
Des Moines Senior Center	Merlino Foods	Ukrainian Community Center
East African Community Services	Mt. Si Senior Center	United Indians of All Tribes Foundation
El Centro de la Raza	Multicultural Self-Sufficiency Movement	United Way of King County
Emergency Feeding Program	Nakani Native Program	University District Service League (food bank)
Entre Hermanos	National Guard	Urban League of Metropolitan Seattle
Enumclaw Senior Center	North Helpline	UTOPIA (United Territories of Pacific Islanders Alliance)
Epic Life Church	North SeaTac Community Center	Villa Comunitaria
Eritrean Association of Greater Seattle	Northwest Harvest	Washington State Department of Agriculture
Fair Work Center	Northwest Seattle Gambian Association	West African Community Council (WACC)
Families First Renton	OSL Serves	West Seattle Food Bank
FamilyWorks	Pacific Algona Senior Center	White Center Food Bank
FareStart	Paradise of Praise	YWCA
FEEST	Pike Market Senior Center	

Background: Seattle's Food Security Efforts

Addressing food insecurity is a key part of the City of Seattle's mission to foster strong, healthy, thriving communities. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, nearly 12% of Seattle residents were food insecure.¹ Data also shows that the deep and persistent racial disparities in access to health and wealth resources result in disproportionately high rates of food insecurity among American Indian/Alaska Native, Black/African American, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, low-income communities, and older people and families with young children from these groups.



Photo credit: Byrd Barr

The City's food access efforts focus on addressing these disparities, with a goal of ensuring that all Seattle residents have access to the nutritious, culturally relevant food they want and need. Following is an overview of the City of Seattle's primary food security investments that were in place prior to the pandemic:

- **Supporting the emergency food system:** The City's Human Services Department (HSD) supports emergency feeding through its Youth and Family Empowerment division. In 2020, HSD funded 16 food banks and 20 meal programs through direct investments for daily operations, connections to benefits and other community services, and procurement of fresh and shelf-stable, culturally appropriate foods. The City also invests in systems supports for provider networks, including transportation, bulk food purchases, and supply needs.
- **Providing meals and connection to older adults:** HSD's Aging and Disability Services (ADS) division is the Area Agency on Aging for Seattle-King County. ADS receives federal funds to support organizations that provide congregate and home-delivered meals to nearly 5,000 older people in Seattle and more than 15,000 countywide.
- **Serving students and their families:** HSD and the Office of Sustainability and Environment (OSE) provide fresh produce and meals for students through a variety of programs. During the school year, HSD works with multiple organizations to provide families with weekend food backpacks and meals at school-age afterschool programs. OSE works with Seattle Public Schools (SPS) Nutrition Services Department to provide healthy, fresh produce snacks to students. HSD's Farm to Table investments provide healthy food stipends to Seattle Preschool Program sites and before/after school programs serving low-income children and families. Over the summer, HSD hosts 115 meal sites in partnership with SPS and community organizations.
- **Investing in individuals and communities:** The City invests in programs that provide individuals with resources to shop for fresh produce and community organizations with resources to develop programs and initiatives that address the root causes of hunger. OSE manages Fresh Bucks, a healthy food access program that helps families and individuals stretch their food budget through vouchers and SNAP Match. In 2019 and 2020, HSD's Food Access Opportunity Fund improved healthy food access by investing in community-based projects designed and led by the people most impacted by racism, social and health disparities, and environmental

¹ According to 2018 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance data analyzed by [Communities Count](#), a collaborative of King County public and private organizations that report on population and community indicators.

injustices. In 2021, this grant program is being incorporated into a new food equity fund which is managed by the Department of Neighborhoods.

Addressing Food Insecurity during COVID-19

The measures needed to protect people from COVID-19 unfortunately had economic ripple effects that deepened food insecurity. Businesses and organizations had to close or drastically alter their operating models to mitigate the risk of spreading the virus. As a result, unemployment increased, creating economic strains that increased food insecurity. Available data suggest that food insecurity rates nearly doubled in King County in the summer of 2020, and the number of King County households receiving Basic Food assistance was about 20% higher in March 2021 than at the start of 2020 (an increase of around 19,100 people).² The COVID-19 pandemic is also repeating and even intensifying patterns of existing inequities driven by racism. For example, according to Public Health – Seattle & King County’s (PHSKC) [COVID-19 data dashboards](#), rates of food insecurity and unemployment claims for nearly all communities of color are higher than for white communities. One of the reasons these disparities are more pronounced during the pandemic is that workers of color, as well as young workers and those with lower educational attainment, are over-represented in the essential workforce experiencing job losses.³

At the same time households were experiencing increased food and economic need, food banks and meal programs had to modify and expand their service options to include home delivery, drive-up and to-go services to allow for social distancing. Schools began providing instruction remotely, requiring nutrition services departments to find other alternatives to ensure families who depend on school meals continue to have that option. Grassroots efforts emerged to meet specific food and connection needs for a variety of communities, providing culturally specific food and meals, as well as critical, in-language information about public health guidance and other resources.

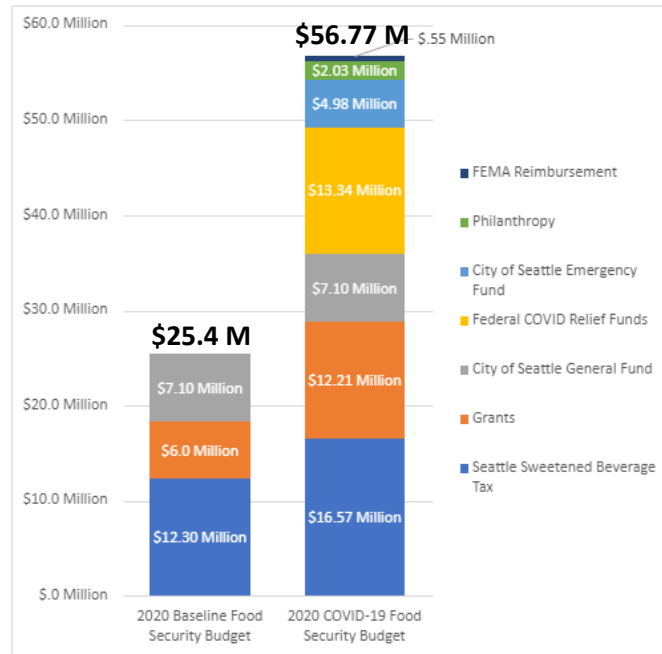
City of Seattle COVID-19 Food Assistance Funding Priorities

Recognizing that COVID-19 was increasing instances of food insecurity, which can significantly affect people’s long-term health and wellbeing, our community saw an urgency to increase investments in food access. The City of Seattle joined partners across King County and the state to invest in and collaborate on efforts to address the increased need, help service providers shift delivery models, and support community-led solutions. Additional resources from federal COVID-19 relief grants and allocations, state grants, and philanthropic contributions—as well as City of Seattle Emergency Fund and Sweetened Beverage Tax revenues—more than doubled the City’s 2020 overall food assistance budget (see Chart 1). In the early months of 2021, the City invested an additional \$12 million to continue meeting the increased need caused by COVID-19.

² Public Health – Seattle, King County published a [report](#) in August 2020 that documented increases in food insecurity. The Basic Food increase is captured in the PHSKC COVID-19 economic, social and overall health impacts [COVID-19 data dashboard](#).

³ Seattle Jobs Initiative published a [COVID-Recessions Recovery report](#) in May 2020 that included this information.

**Chart 1: City of Seattle 2020 Food Security Budget
Baseline and COVID-19 Response**



The City’s response prioritized providing nutritious, culturally relevant food and meals to communities disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, including seniors, low-income families and children, communities of color, immigrants and refugees, and unsheltered individuals and families. To direct investments where they were most needed, the City sought input from community partners and program leads and defined these three priority areas:

- Population-centered food and meal support for vulnerable populations.** Key investments focused on communities most impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic due to health risks, income level, immigration status, and/or racial disparities. The City’s efforts focused on reaching the approximately 16,500 Seattle Public School students qualifying for free and reduced-price lunch impacted by school closures, the more than 15,000 older adults served by King County meal providers who were now homebound, and countless people who cannot access or have concerns about accessing traditional emergency food and government assistance programs. Investments to reach these populations included direct grants to organizations to support operation needs and culturally relevant, nutritious food purchases, increasing reimbursements to service providers to account for program changes, increasing meals at shelters and permanent supportive housing, and supplementing school meals.
- Direct assistance to households and community organizations most impacted.** The economic strain caused by COVID-19 impacted and continues to impact households and the community-based organizations that provide culturally relevant support to individuals and families. The City developed direct assistance and grant programs to help mitigate those impacts.
- Systems support for the food security ecosystem.** Regional partners collaborated to promote centralized transportation and staffing resources, as well as investments in personal protective equipment (PPE), sanitation supplies and bulk purchases of high-demand, nutrient dense foods.



Photo credit: North Beach
Elementary School



COVID-19 Food Assistance Highlights

Population-centered meal and food support for vulnerable populations

To reach those most impacted by COVID-19, the City partnered with service providers to bolster supports through service delivery methods tailored to different populations. These included food banks, meal programs, community-led efforts, and school food and meal distribution.

Food banks, which are open and available to anyone experiencing food insecurity, changed their service models to keep staff and customers safe and to ensure food access through new or expanded delivery programs. The City's HSD team supported these efforts by investing and helping to procure personal protective equipment (PPE) and other supplies and nearly \$3.5 million in direct grants to Seattle Food Committee member food banks. Food banks used those funds to purchase food and supplies and support staffing needs. In the early months of the pandemic, the City also provided funding for nearly 16,000 emergency food boxes distributed at community and school meal sites.

Senior meal programs served over 950,000 meals in the first year of the pandemic, primarily through home delivery and to-go meals. Over 50 meal sites and programs throughout King County that received funds through HSD's Aging and Disability Services shifted from their usual in-person meals and social activities to pick-up and home delivery. Transportation agencies, which usually help older adults travel to meal programs and other activities, pivoted their services to assist with delivery. In 2020, the congregate meal programs saw an almost 30% increase in demand compared to 2019. HSD also contracts with two agencies that delivered meals to homebound older adults prior to the pandemic. The formal intake and assessment processes were waived to expand eligibility in light of the increased health risk COVID-19 posed to all older adults. In addition to supporting providers with increased reimbursements and other resources, HSD also set up a temporary grocery delivery program, helped providers avoid furloughs by pivoting staff to support delivery, and worked with community-based

organizations to provide connections and resources to Black/African American and Latinx populations experiencing greater food access challenges.

Shelter and other community meal programs continued to be important community resources. From April 2020 to March 2021, over 1 million meals were served to people experiencing homelessness or living in permanent supportive housing through HSD’s partnerships with OSL Serves and FareStart. Increased funding from federal COVID-19 relief packages and a state grant allowed organizations to provide up to three meals per day for residents of the Downtown Emergency Service Center, Low Income Housing Institute, Catholic Community Services, Plymouth Housing Group, WHEEL, and YWCA programs.

Schools had to completely change the way they provided **student meals** when districts shifted from in-person to online learning. Since many families depend on school meals to provide their children with breakfast and lunch, closed buildings impacted food security as well as learning. To mitigate this impact, Seattle Public Schools opened 26 meal sites where families could pick up food and meals through the spring of 2020 and increased to 40 meal sites through the summer and 2020-2021 school year. The district also provided meal delivery options through dozens of bus routes and partnerships with local delivery companies. The City of Seattle joined several partners in supplementing food and meals available at school and community sites to reach as many families as possible. This included some organizations increasing the number of weekend backpacks available for pick up at school sites by 1,750 backpacks per week, totaling 91,000 additional backpacks through March 2021. OSE shifted its snack programs to provide a weekly average of 7,000 bags of fresh produce to families through meal sites and delivery, for a total of more than 83,000 bags distributed by the end of March 2021. Over the school holiday in December, HSD worked with OSL Serves to provide 9,000 food boxes through 15 school meal sites and delivery to students experiencing homelessness, students with disabilities, and other priority populations.

Fast Facts

The City’s investments in COVID-19 emergency food response supported organizations that provided the following for our community.

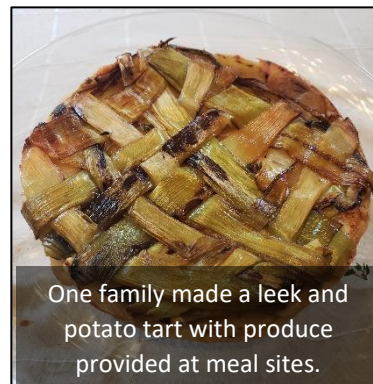
More than **950,000 meals to older adults** across King County.

More than **1 million additional meals to individuals** living currently or formerly homeless, at more than 40 shelters and permanent supportive housing programs.

Around **78,000 additional weekend backpacks, more than 83,000 produce bags, and 9,000 holiday meals** to students and their families.

“SPS kitchen managers relish the days they can promote fresh, healthy foods at meal sites. They’ve noticed significant increases in participation rates on the days produce bags are available.”

– *Emme Collins, SPS Head Chef*



One family made a leek and potato tart with produce provided at meal sites.

Direct assistance to households and community organizations

The City also supported efforts to provide direct assistance to households disproportionately impacted by the pandemic and the community organizations that serve them. The City collaborated with community and government partners to ensure individuals and families were aware of changes to their existing food assistance benefits and opportunities to access additional benefits, such as the Pandemic EBT available to students enrolled in free and reduced-price lunch.

DIRECT ASSISTANCE TO HOUSEHOLDS

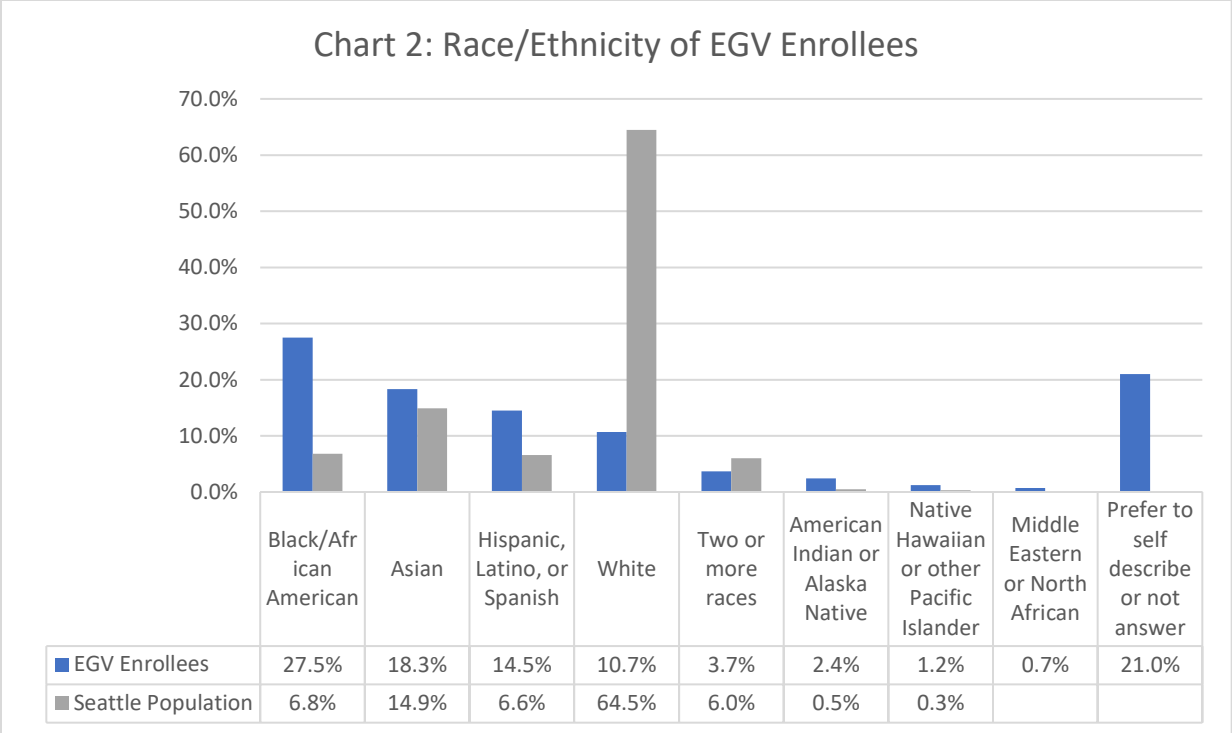
Emergency Grocery Vouchers. The partnerships and systems built through the OSE's ongoing Fresh Bucks program allowed the City to quickly stand up a broader Emergency Grocery Voucher (EGV) program when the pandemic began. What started as a two-month program for 6,000 households expanded into a 13-month program reaching over 14,000 households. Eligible and enrolled households each received a total of \$1,920 distributed over seven months (\$400 a month for first three months, \$180 a month for last four). Total household spending using emergency grocery assistance was approximately \$25.3 million.

Households Served by Emergency Grocery Vouchers

Reaching communities of color was a key goal of the EGV program, given the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified existing inequities driven by institutional racism. With this goal in mind, OSE worked with multiple City departments and the Mayor's Office to develop two strategies to qualify and enroll households into the program:

- **Strategy 1: Automatic Enrollment of Income-Qualified Households.** The City enrolled households participating in City assistance programs, including food assistance, childcare, preschool, youth employment, and case management. The programs have close ties to Black, Indigenous, people of color, immigrants, refugees, and English language learners, and they use culturally and linguistically relevant strategies to reach and serve these priority populations.
- **Strategy 2: Community-Driven Enrollment of Households Most Impacted.** For this enrollment strategy, the City partnered with 27 community-based organizations (CBOs) to qualify and enroll households that experienced income loss or hardship associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. The organizations the City invited to enroll households have deep relationships and connections to Seattle residents and workers experiencing structural or institutional barriers to accessing support from the government (such as language barriers, fear of deportation, experiencing domestic violence, and not qualifying for other benefits). Additionally, to reach Black, Native and Indigenous, people of color, immigrants, and refugees, organizations that serve these communities were prioritized.

Based on self-reported race/ethnicity data from the enrollees, these strategies were effective at reaching priority populations; 70% of all enrollees identified as a person of color. Black/African American enrollees were the highest represented racial/ethnic group, followed by Asian, and Hispanic/Latinx. See chart 2 for a detailed breakdown of enrollees by race/ethnicity.



Fresh Bucks. OSE also adjusted the Fresh Bucks program in the early days of the pandemic to give recipients more flexibility in their shopping. The Fresh Bucks team worked with Delridge Grocery Co-op to pivot from in-person shopping to offering produce box deliveries for Fresh Bucks voucher program customers. Seattle farmers markets offered online produce orders that could be purchased with Fresh Bucks vouchers or EBT benefits and picked up at the market. In 2020, overall Fresh Bucks enrollment was at its highest point, reaching more than 12,000 households. Increased City investments, combined with year-end program savings, made it possible to serve 3,100 additional households with benefits starting in late 2020 and continuing through 2021.

“My family has been receiving grocery vouchers from the city and I just wanted to say thank you. I don't know how to express in words how much this has meant to us. It's provided us security in these difficult times and showed that we aren't forgotten. **We matter to our city. I love Seattle!**” – *Grocery voucher recipient*

INVESTING IN COMMUNITY-LED EFFORTS

Community Food Fund. The City of Seattle partnered with United Way of King County to provide grants totaling nearly \$2 million to community organizations serving Black, Indigenous, and people of color, as well as immigrant and refugee communities. Twenty-five organizations received grants funded by HSD to support a variety of efforts, including food delivery, culturally appropriate meals for older adults, pop-

up food sites, a new greenhouse, cold storage, and collaborations with restaurants that serve culturally specific foods to get hot meals to vulnerable communities.

“The grocery delivery service was a lifesaver and was an extremely welcome resource during the winter season. Being able to have access to staples for holding me over during the rainy, colder months to make healthy foods has been an incredible gift.”

– *Queer the Land client*

Queer the Land used the Community Food Fund grant to provide perishable and non-perishable food to a network of Queer, Trans, Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (QT2BIPOC) communities in South Seattle.

System supports for emergency food network

From the start of the pandemic, the City’s emergency food response team worked actively with internal and external stakeholders to better assess and respond to community needs. The City collaborated to prioritize and advocate for the transportation, staffing, and PPE supplies needed for hunger relief partners to continue their services. The City developed new ways to communicate about available resources, including a map of food/meal access points and promotion of federal benefits related to economic and food security.

Transportation. King County Metro (through the Access paratransit program) and Sound Generations (Hyde Shuttles) provided critical support to senior meal programs and food banks. These services pivoted from passenger transportation to delivering food and meals to older adults and other vulnerable populations. The two organizations made over 216,000 trips to deliver products from food banks and meal programs to older adults and others in need. The City of Seattle worked with King County Metro and Public Health – Seattle & King County to develop plans for sustained home delivery service throughout the pandemic emergency. Funding flexibility at the federal and state level allowed Metro and Sound Generations to continue providing delivery service into 2021.



Photo credit: Southeast Seattle Senior Center

Staffing. Food banks and meal programs are highly dependent on volunteers, many of whom are older adults and thus more vulnerable to COVID-19. As a result, service providers saw a significant decrease in volunteers at a time when demand was increasing, and delivery models became more labor-intensive. To help address this challenge, HSD redeployed more than 60 employees to meal programs from May - July 2020. The City also joined countywide efforts to advocate for the National Guard to be deployed to support the essential functions of the city’s emergency food system. National Guard members worked at food banks and meal programs throughout 2020 and into 2021, with around 123 deployed at 23 Seattle food banks and King County (including Seattle) senior meal programs at the end of December.

Partners including UWKC and the Washington State Department of Commerce also increased the number of AmeriCorps members assigned to hunger relief service providers. In March 2021, the Department of Commerce began providing a temporary employee placement program in partnership with workforce development councils to continue meeting staffing needs as the National Guard deployments began to wind down.

Communication. Throughout the pandemic, many people who had never relied on the emergency food system began needing support, making it critical for the City to share relevant, up-to-date information about available resources as widely as possible. The Mayor’s Office established a [COVID-19 Resources page](#) which was updated regularly with local, state, and federal food assistance resources, as well as phone numbers to call for assistance navigating these benefits and services. HSD’s Data, Performance, and Evaluation team worked with Public Health -- Seattle & King County to build an [interactive map](#) of food banks, meal programs, and school meal sites operating in Seattle and King County. The map is available to the public and provides up-to-date details for these resources, receiving tens of thousands of views through March 2021. From March through December 2020, the Department of Neighborhoods hosted regular webinars to share information about COVID-19 resources with community members and service providers. The City also collaborated with UWKC, PHSKC, Seattle Public Schools, and others to promote newly available food assistance benefits such as Pandemic EBT and changes to ongoing benefits such as Basic Foods (Washington’s SNAP/food stamps program).

PPE, bulk food and other supplies. In the early days of the pandemic, PPE and sanitation supplies were difficult for individual agencies to procure. The City purchased these items for providers and distributed them system wide. Leveraging FEMA funds, the City purchased PPE, cleaning and distribution supplies, and nutritionally dense bulk food items for partners to distribute to their food bank and meal program networks. Centralized distribution of supplies helped providers continue their work with proper protection and the bulk buy purchases helped fill gaps in high demand food items.

Looking Ahead

As the pandemic and its economic impacts have continued into 2021, so have the City’s collaborations and investments to support community food needs. Even as we see signs of hope that the pandemic will be brought under control, we know the economic toll is likely to ripple into the next couple of years. The City of Seattle remains committed to working with community partners to address these impacts and the root causes of hunger, so all residents have access to the nutritious food they need to thrive.