

Partners in food security

May 6, 2020

The COVID-19 pandemic has made people vulnerable in many ways, affecting both public health and basic needs. More than 22 million Americans, including more than 540,000 Minnesotans, have applied for unemployment benefits since March 2020.

With the record loss of jobs, Minnesota's food banks and food shelves are seeing double or triple the usual demand for food. In order to meet this demand quickly and effectively, state leaders must understand what food shelves need and where they need it.

To help provide this knowledge, University of Minnesota Extension has teamed up with the Minnesota Department of Human Services (DHS) and Minnesota Management and Budget.

Meeting of the Minds

As part of a broader food security initiative during the pandemic, Extension facilitates virtual statewide food security work group food bank and food shelf partner check-ins that draw around 200 representatives from all food bank regions in Minnesota, leaders from state agencies and tribal nations, and other stakeholders.



<https://extension.umn.edu/sites/extension.umn.edu/files/masked%20food%20shelf%20worker.jpg>

"Food shelves across the state are committed to serving their clients with dignity and respect," says Kelly Kunkel, an Extension health and nutrition educator who helps lead the meetings. "They want to make sure that volunteers and clients are safe and they are innovative in their delivery methods to ensure safety."

One topic of mutual interest is how rural transit systems are ramping up to provide food delivery, as transit ridership declines during the stay-at-home orders. Other topics include new federal grants, emergency produce boxes and the uptick in fresh produce donations from local growers.

Ultimately, everyone needs to be on the same page about funding opportunities, food availability, safe operations, and other resources, while sharing updates and ideas from all corners of the state.

Data-driven solutions

Extension provides expertise and support for weekly surveys, which go to representatives from Minnesota's 400-plus food banks and include questions about their staffing, food, and funding needs. Along with multiple choice, the surveys pose open-ended questions, such as "How can the State of Minnesota better serve your community?"

"The surveys provide real-time snapshots of the hunger relief community's challenges and creativity, and provide specific information to inform the work of the Governor's Food Security Work Group," says Tikki Brown, director of Economic Opportunity and Nutrition Assistance with Minnesota DHS.

According to a recent survey, 30 percent of Minnesota food shelves report challenges to finding enough food, while 70 percent report being under financial or operational strain. "Food shelves are experiencing increased costs of food and are adapting their food distribution systems to maintain social distancing, both for volunteers and clients," says Brown.

Lasting relationships

The food security meetings and surveys are the latest example of a longstanding partnership between University of Minnesota Extension and Minnesota DHS. Over the years, Extension's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Education (SNAP-Ed) team has helped thousands of low-income individuals and families make diet and lifestyle choices to improve their health and prevent obesity.

In early May, the SNAP-Ed team began facilitating monthly phone conversations with food shelves in Minnesota.

"Not all food shelves are completing the weekly survey and this is a way to find out what is happening with them," says Kunkel. "SNAP-Ed educators have had a positive relationship with food shelf partners prior to COVID-19. We're building these relationships to better support the state of Minnesota and people in need."

Food Security Handouts from Extension

- [Two-Week Menu Kit](#)
- [Two-Week Menu Guide](#)
- [Emergency Food Box Resources](#)

Connect with Extension

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