

# How the charitable food system is adapting to life under the pandemic

Feeding America COO Katie Fitzgerald reflects on how food banks have responded to challenges of COVID-19, and lessons learned in the process.



In this interview, McKinsey's Roberto Uchoa follows up with COO and executive vice president of Feeding America, Katie Fitzgerald, from [their April conversation](#). Katie Fitzgerald discusses how the organization and food banks across the country have adapted to life under the pandemic. She also offers insights into how private sector partners can engage, as well as the structural challenges the charitable food system faces. An edited transcript of the interview follows.

**Roberto Uchoa:** Katie, thank you so much for the opportunity to connect with you again and reflect on 2020. When we last spoke in April, we were at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. And throughout the year, we've had so many crises. I'd like to hear from you—how have you and your team operated throughout this year, and what lessons have you learned that you might actually reflect on?

**Katie Fitzgerald:** As a network, we distributed 4.2 billion meals since March 1, since the beginning of the pandemic. We have sustained distribution at about 50 percent higher than we were distributing food before the pandemic. We've raised and distributed close to \$315 million, so pretty much 99 percent so far and are on track to finish the full distribution of the COVID-19 response fund, for which we are still collecting resources.

And then, in addition to all that you mentioned, we had seven major natural disasters that our network persevered through, between wildfires, and hurricanes, and the rest. So that's how we've responded—what we have been able to do in terms of shifting our operations has been looking at really moving from a sprint to a marathon.

And as you know, McKinsey & Company has been very helpful to us in that regard, because we've been able to look ahead through the rest of our current fiscal year and project about an \$8 billion meal gap that has helped us to really get organized and focused on the future. We've also done a great deal to shift the organization from our earliest days of the response, where—

as we talked about back in April—we had basically redeployed our staff and had set up a whole internal response team. And we've taken the lessons learned from that and continued many of those practices, though we're back to more of our normal, if you can say “normal,” functions.

We have instituted a new bi-monthly roundtable discussion that allows for much greater transparency and inclusion in this virtual setting, so folks can understand what's going on in the organization, how we're responding across the network. We've gotten really good at standing up SWAT teams in terms of, for instance, responding to the Coronavirus Food Assistance Program that came online in April and went through until just about recently. We really were able, even within the course of the last eight months, to affirm and dig deeper into making sure that we were reaching communities that are disproportionately impacted by food insecurity—communities of color.

We know black households experience food insecurity at about 2 and 1/2 times the rate of white households in this country, Latino households about 2 times the rate. And so, for instance, in one of our major grant deployments, we were able to stand up a racial disparity dashboard that helped our 200 Feeding America food banks focus their strategies and interventions to really try to reach those disproportionately impacted communities in their service areas. So this has been a busy time, a lot of learning, but a lot of really terrific response against a lot of odds.

**Roberto Uchoa:** You mentioned a lot of learning and the need to be agile. Would you mention a bit about the types of innovations that the food bank brought to bear—and *had* to bring to bear—to achieve their goals amidst all these crises.

**Katie Fitzgerald:** Very early on, food banks were rapidly figuring out how to distribute food and really pick up, sort, and pack food, which

are all congregate activities and require a lot of human interaction. As you know, we as a network have done a really great job of figuring out how to distribute food in a low touch or no touch setting.

But I think what I would say has been a lesson learned over the past eight months is that our food banks have done an incredible job innovating around how to contain any kind of outbreak that might be occurring in their distribution network, and how to pre-empt that from happening, how to prevent that.

What we've seen happen with food bankers, who know food banking but aren't public health experts, is how rapidly they've learned and how we've been able to share information across our network. We have food banks that have teams operating in physical pods in their facilities. That way, if there is an outbreak or if someone, unfortunately, contracts the virus, they can essentially shut down that pod and seal off those folks from the rest of the organization so that they can continue to operate.

We've had food banks that have had to shut down but have been able to keep distribution of food going through other partners without interrupting what services people need in communities. So we've just seen this tremendous innovation and rapid learning around how to manage this mass distribution, meet this surge in demand in a pandemic environment.

The other thing I might mention is that we've seen really quick new partnerships get established. While we were starting to lean into some home delivery, the pandemic has required us to be able to do that much more aggressively and at scale. And so we're seeing food banks in different parts of the country enter into partnerships with Uber Eats and DoorDash and even just standing up new volunteer systems of home delivery, which have been really important for seniors who are experiencing food insecurity.

**Roberto Uchoa:** How are you going to get the volunteers and the network set up to work in this new environment? Any lessons learned on how the workforce deployment evolved? And any

additional thoughts on how this might actually look going forward?

**Katie Fitzgerald:** We have about 60 percent of our food banks today that are currently accepting and in need of volunteer support. So let me say at the outset that we haven't quite figured this out completely. Because in a non-pandemic environment, our whole model requires volunteer labor—it's the backbone of how we do our work.

With 2 million volunteers a month across the country who are part and parcel of making this mission work, it's been, as you can imagine, a significant challenge to us. Early on in the pandemic, we had organizations like Team Rubicon get involved, a veterans organization that could deploy teams to us. We've also had other companies and organizations deploy teams, including the National Guard.

And what I would say we've learned is that in this environment it is important have consistent volunteers—teams of volunteers that can be trained, that understand the protocols, that are reliable—because as soon as you start introducing into the environment a daily mix of people, that's when we've found we start to get into trouble with outbreaks of the virus. I've seen a lot of food banks really come up with new systems of regular teamed approaches that has helped with the volunteer solution.

In terms of demand and supply, if you recall back in April, we were seeing a consistent increase in demand of about 70 percent on average across the network. That has leveled out somewhat, so that on any given month, our food banks report to us they're seeing on average 50 to 60 percent more people coming to food distributions. We haven't really seen the numbers go down below that level.

But the go-forward on demand that worries us, as we move into early 2021, is that as of right now, unemployment benefits will be coming to a close. We know the eviction moratorium that is in place will come to an end at the end of

December. We know food prices are up, and in winter, especially in the northern climate of this country, it's always the case that food insecurity gets worse in the winter months because people are having to pay for heating and take care of those other utilities. So we are concerned that we're not going to see that demand go down anytime soon as the virus is also surging, even though we are hopeful with the promise of a vaccine down the road.

**Roberto Uchoa:** You mentioned a few of those challenges regarding the increase in food insecurity that seasonally gets higher during the winter. As we move forward in 2021, any additional challenges that concern you guys? But actually even more important, any opportunities that you see that '21 can bring?

**Katie Fitzgerald:** Despite some of the challenges that we see, we are hopeful because we are also seeing a great deal of opportunity. One of the major opportunities, of course—and I would say an over-arching opportunity—is that the issue of food insecurity in this country has never had the attention and the interest, at least in the last 20 to 30 years, that it has today.

And so we're seeing all kinds of organizations and people wanting to bring their best thinking to this movement to create an America where no one is hungry. Because as you know, we don't have a food problem in this country, we have a food connection problem. We're really buoyed by the level of interest in involvement that we and many others who are working in the space are experiencing.

I think one of our greatest opportunities to really transform our system is going to be in advancing our technology roadmap: agency locator apps that help people find food in their communities, order ahead applications—we have one that we call Order Ahead that allows people to order food and then be able to pick it up at their convenience—our need to really speed along, our ability to have supply and demand very visible and transparent throughout our network through a shared data warehouse that we're working very hard with our network food banks to achieve.

And then, of course, we have one of the largest national apps called Meal Connect that allows food donors to post their food donations, and food banks can pick up those food donations right in the app. And we've got a build-out of that that will be coming online in 2021 that will allow for more peer-to-peer sharing, more omnichannel capability that will allow us to get agrifood into that system and even pay the small fees associated with that. So lots of great potential in the technology space, and we really need people's ongoing support and innovation there, because we're food bankers; we benefit a lot from folks in that space who can bring their expertise to bear to help us out.

**Roberto Uchoa:** So perhaps let's go deeper there, because that's a great point on opportunities for partnership given the challenges and opportunities in technology, or addressing the demand, or in the volunteer gap. How can private sector partners, with your organization or with your members, accelerate these opportunities in order to address the challenges?

**Katie Fitzgerald:** Well, McKinsey & Company has been a great example of that. You all have done so much with your commitment to addressing food insecurity to help not only the Feeding America national office, but member food banks all across this country where you have offices and partners working.

Ask yourself what are your core competencies and what might you be able to bring to a partnership that will help us solve for the three facets of our perfect storm: the increased demand and our need to be able to meet that demand; how we problem solve on the supply side, which is the food connection—we've had so much agricultural surplus food at times, and we've really struggled to figure out how to quickly get that food to the charitable food system, how to handle processing, how to overcome acquisition costs, those sorts of things—and then the third piece is the logistics and distribution side of things: how to help us solve for cold storage, how to help us solve for low touch, no touch distribution, and all of the technology pieces that I discussed that enable

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all dimensions of that, so really thinking about core competencies.

And then the ask I have of partners—and you all have done a great job of this—is to come into that partnership meeting us where we are. We are a network of nonprofit organizations, and we're mighty, and we're proud, and we do a lot of things really well. But our capacity and capabilities aren't always where our for-profit partners either expect us to be or want us to be.

Where I have found the partnerships to be most successful is when we can really sort of level-set on where we are, what we can do together, and then co-create, build together, and set those expectations together. That's where the magic happens, and that's where we can really create great things for people all over this country who need us so desperately right now.

**Roberto Uchoa:** If there was one thing you could fix in the current system to address food insecurity, what would that be?

**Katie Fitzgerald:** Well, I'm going to take a point of privilege and pick two things. The first would be that we have got to figure out how to solve for moving agricultural surplus food more quickly into the charitable food system when that food is available. And that's going to require public-private partnerships. We've got a lot of great partners that we're working with now on that and lots of innovations in the dairy space, in protein, in produce—but being able to get that to scale, we really do believe that that's where the greatest opportunity is. The second one would be transforming the client experience. We are a network of 200 food banks and 60,000 partner organizations—

most of whom are volunteer, faith-based, community-based organizations—and that's the place where the client, our neighbors who are food insecure, meet up with the help.

We are looking forward to a much more intensive set of investments to transform that experience for people facing hunger so that it's convenient, so that it's highly accessible, so that they don't have to wait until that Wednesday afternoon from 1 to 4 PM when the food pantries open—that they can access that food throughout the week as needed, that it's highly nutritious, and that when people come into interaction with the charitable food system, they also are getting access to other resources and benefits that may help them and their families.

The partnership with McKinsey & Company has been just truly invaluable to our ability to look ahead and prepare and plan and respond to this incredible need. My hope is that people don't forget. Once we hopefully get to a place where the economy can fully reopen, where we have vaccines in place, and we have the pandemic in our rearview mirror, I hope people don't forget how very fragile and how very quickly American families can get to a place of food insecurity.

And that this is a solvable problem. Let's make sure that we build a system better that meets the needs of food insecure Americans moving forward, and that we are also positioned well to handle any future challenges that we may see. We're excited about the future and very determined to get through this period of time meeting every American family's needs as best we can.

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