

Social Sector Practice

Food security and the coronavirus crisis: A view from Feeding America's COO

Katie Fitzgerald discusses the efforts of Feeding America, a national hunger-relief organization, to obtain and distribute food amid the challenges of the coronavirus pandemic.



The coronavirus crisis and its economic impact have created extraordinary demand for food across the United States. As COO of Feeding America, Katie Fitzgerald has led the organization's effort to help food banks and service agencies (such as partner food pantries and meal-distribution programs) across the nation to meet this demand. In a video interview, recorded on April 9, Fitzgerald discusses the scale of the challenge, the way that Feeding America has reorganized itself to support mass distribution of food donations, and the innovations that food banks and agencies have made to protect the health of workers and volunteers and the people they serve. A condensed and edited version of Fitzgerald's remarks appears below.

The dual food-security challenge

With COVID-19, I think people are seeing that—very quickly and for reasons beyond one's control—one can end up in a situation of food insecurity. And it is a terrifying place to be. We are seeing an incredible skyrocketing in need all across the country. Prior to COVID-19, we knew that there were about 37 million Americans who were food insecure. Since the beginning of the outbreak and with increases in unemployment, we estimate that there are an additional 17 million people who are facing food insecurity right now. That's a 46 percent increase.

An even greater challenge right now is that we may not have the food that our food banks and their partners need to meet that demand. As you can imagine, food banks' inventories were not ready for a sudden surge in demand. On average, I would say we're seeing 30 percent more people showing up for assistance, many of whom have never asked for food assistance before.

Getting enough shelf-stable food is a particular challenge. We've had great opportunities to secure perishable food, especially from the food-service industry. Produce, dairy, protein, frozen foods are becoming available to us. They're great. But for our lower-capacity partners, freezer and cooler storage present logistical challenges. What we really need

is shelf-stable food for emergency boxes. That's where we're challenged because of how tight the supply chain is right now.

An all-out COVID-19 response

Our COVID-19 response efforts are comprehensive, with respect to who we are and what we do now. We have some continuing streams of work, but they are minimal compared to how we have repositioned ourselves and our resources to support the 200 food banks across the country and the 60,000 agencies that work with them. We've re-matrixed the entire organization, gone through an entire staff assessment, found where we had capacity that could be redeployed, and redeployed it accordingly.

We also set up new reporting systems, communication vehicles for our networks, webinar opportunities, and technologies. One of these is an emerging-practice function that lets food banks share rapidly, in real time, how they are innovating solutions on the ground.

Innovations across a national network

The entire charitable food-assistance system in this country depends on about 2 million volunteers a year and 60,000 agencies, many of which are volunteer-led and run. And these folks all across this country are showing up. They have adapted and innovated health and safety protocols for sorting food, receiving food, and selecting orders in the warehouse.

One of the neatest innovations has been that many food banks have turned to 24-hour warehouse operations. Typically, they don't do that. Now they have, for the precise purpose of making sure that there's sufficient physical distancing when warehouse selectors are pulling orders.

Other innovations have been in our distribution space, where we are perfecting, in many communities, low-contact or no-contact distributions. I'm sure people have seen videos

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of lines of cars all across this country lined up to receive boxes of food. And that has been an innovation led by our tremendous network of resilient leaders.

Sustaining food-assistance capacity

We are struggling to get food quickly enough to send to food banks. The government's response has been very good: in the first two bills, Congress allocated an additional \$600 million to the Emergency Food Assistance Program. But that food is not likely to come to communities until June or July.

We're very worried about May and early June. About 20 percent of our food banks are reporting that

if they don't get more food in the next two to four weeks, they may not be able to serve the needs of their local communities.

We have had some manufacturers approach us to open up production lines for items that are no longer in demand in the market, to make food that they are donating straight to us. We certainly need funding to purchase more food that we can get quickly.

Finally, many of our volunteers are older and in high-risk categories, so we have seen a precipitous decline in the number of people who can help us with sorting and distributing food. A number of partners have approached us to help with volunteer capacity.

Katie Fitzgerald is the executive vice president and COO of Feeding America. This interview was conducted by **Roberto Uchoa**, a senior partner in McKinsey's Chicago office.

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