

Turning over a new leaf: Using crisis to build back stronger

Nationwide, food banks seek to expand their services to address more than hunger; one Washington, DC, food bank is using the loss of its partner network to do just that.

by Kyle Hutzler, Pradeep Prabhala, Byron Ruby, and Galo Tocagni



Food banks have long provided charitable food aid to local food pantries and other frontline organizations serving people without enough to eat. Now, more of them are expanding beyond food to provide access to healthcare, financial coaching, job skills, and other support.

The logic is simple. If people can attain jobs skills, financial resilience, and better economic success, they have a better chance of overcoming the circumstances that cause food insecurity in the first place.

Key to this “food+” strategy is working with community partners that have complementary skills or offerings to help fulfill this mission. Traditionally, food banks store, warehouse, and then distribute millions of pounds of food to a network of partners in a given region. These partners include local food pantries, soup kitchens, faith-based groups, and other community organizations. However, as food banks nationwide seek to maximize the benefit of the food they provide, they are reexamining their networks for partners that can offer more types of services. This includes searching for new partner organizations to help fill service gaps, based on these organizations’ location, resources, existing relationships with the community, and ability to scale.

The Capital Area Food Bank (CAFB) is one such food bank pursuing a food+ approach. Well before the COVID-19 crisis, CAFB had kicked off a five-year strategic plan to partner with providers of basic support services to address the root causes of hunger by improving access to healthy food and resources for better health and financial sustainability. That mission became urgent once the pandemic hit and the number of people without enough to eat in the Washington, DC, metropolitan area jumped 50 percent—from 400,000 to an estimated 600,000 people.

During the height of the crisis in March, the vast majority of the local food pantries, soup kitchens, faith-based organizations and other community groups that CAFB had worked with to distribute food to the community closed temporarily. CAFB leaders’ first order of business was coming up with

short-term solutions to get food out to people who needed it. As time went on, they recognized the opportunity to accelerate their food+ work. This meant assessing whether existing partners could expand what they offered, finding new collaborators, and when necessary, providing services directly.

“We don’t see ourselves as just acting in the food sector, but eradicating poverty, and we need to reach across sectors to do that,” said Capital Area Food Bank CEO Radha Muthiah.

Using tools other than food to end hunger

Food banks across the country are implementing sweeping changes to help Americans who don’t have enough to eat, a number that has swelled to an estimated 54 million during the pandemic. During the crisis, food banks responded by upgrading warehouse practices to move increased food supplies. They shifted to segmented planning for different food sources and distribution channels to operate more efficiently. And they adopted data analytics to improve forecasting and staffing.

But addressing the underlying drivers of food insecurity requires food banks to go a step further.

Even before the pandemic, food banks started shifting from focusing exclusively on addressing hunger to providing job training and other non-food support. Some organizations turned their kitchens into classrooms to teach culinary skills, and used distribution centers to train people for warehouse work.

Since 2015, Feeding America, a national network of 200 food banks that provides meals to more than 40 million people a year, began running pilots with food banks in multiple states to explore the most effective roles food banks can play in eradicating hunger in the long term. Part of this work is to understand how the needs of populations differ by region, and how they’re the same, “so each food bank doesn’t have to come up with their own model,” said Erica Greeley, Feeding America’s vice president of economic mobility.

When food banks decide to expand their impact (in part, by offering more services), the criteria to determine which organizations to partner with need to take into account a group's circumstances and goals, according to food bank officials and other experts. For example, because the economic fallout of the pandemic disproportionately affects underrepresented people, many food banks want to strengthen relationships with these hard-hit communities within their service areas. Food banks with that goal should seek out groups that are long-time trusted members of the communities that need help, Greeley said. Or, for food banks that wish to pair food aid with financial coaching, they can look for providers of those services that can boast a proven coaching model and an accompanying track record.

In the nation's capital, helping the marginalized move to the mainstream

Leaders at the Capital Area Food Bank decided to expand to a food+ mission to counter the economic disparities in its service area, where the top 20 percent of the population is 29 times wealthier than the bottom 20 percent, and where there's a 30-year difference in life expectancy within a ten-mile radius.

As part of the development of its strategic plan, the food bank conducted a survey that showed its client base lacked access to transportation and would benefit from receiving multiple services in one place. Additionally, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the food bank also wanted to help people get workforce training that could make them attractive job candidates at a time when Washington, DC, and surrounding counties were growing economically, with companies opening or moving to the area.

"Our strategy has been to help individuals so they can be part of the growth that's happening instead of continuing to be sidelined and marginalized," said Muthiah, the food bank's CEO.

After months of preparation, CAFB officially kicked off its food+ strategy in summer 2019 by restructuring operations to add related staff and equipment, and kicking off a handful of health, workforce development, and education projects.

But when COVID-19 struck, the vast majority of the food bank's 450 community partners shut down to comply with local safety guidelines. To meet the substantial increase in demand caused by the pandemic and resulting job losses, the food bank pivoted. In addition to distributing food through a small number of partners that were able to stay open, CAFB filled emergency food boxes itself and distributed them directly, including at parking-lot pickup events. To cover areas where it did not have a strong presence, the food bank brought on temporary partners within its service area, including non-governmental organizations, faith-based groups, and local governments.

Mapping out need

Once its day-to-day operations settled into a new normal, the food bank was able to return to rolling out its food+ mission. As part of that deployment, CAFB partnered with McKinsey to understand how to maximize its resources and existing partnerships, and how to find new partners for its expanded mission. (See sidebar, "Considerations for 'food+' partners.")

For that, CAFB and McKinsey conducted a geospatial analysis to look for redundancies and gaps in the existing distribution system, plotting the proximity of food pantry partners to major food distribution hubs (Exhibit 1).

They found that about 57 of the food bank's direct distribution sites, roughly 7 percent of the total, were in neighborhoods that were already sufficiently served by existing distribution partners. This was an indication that the food bank would be better off redirecting duplicative resources to neighborhoods with unmet demand, either by bringing on new partners, or directly distributing themselves.

The analysis also revealed that 70 percent of CAFB's direct distributions were happening in a portion of its service area that was home to about 500 existing groups that could be potential food or food+ partners. As a next step, CAFB developed a set of criteria that it could use to

Considerations for Food+ Partners

Building off the work of CAFB, food banks seeking to expand their services might consider using the following steps to build their own “food+” network:

Start by creating a service-area map. Such a map should show existing partners in proportion to the population of food-insecure people in the area. According to Muthiah, showing existing partners on a map can make it easier to see how many additional groups a food bank needs to work with, and where.

Research potential partners. Once a food bank chooses new services to offer, it needs to identify the organizations within its coverage area that could provide them. If the food bank serves neighborhoods with a younger population, for example, the group might want to add partners that can provide educational services, whereas “another county with older population might need an entirely different partner set,” Muthiah said.

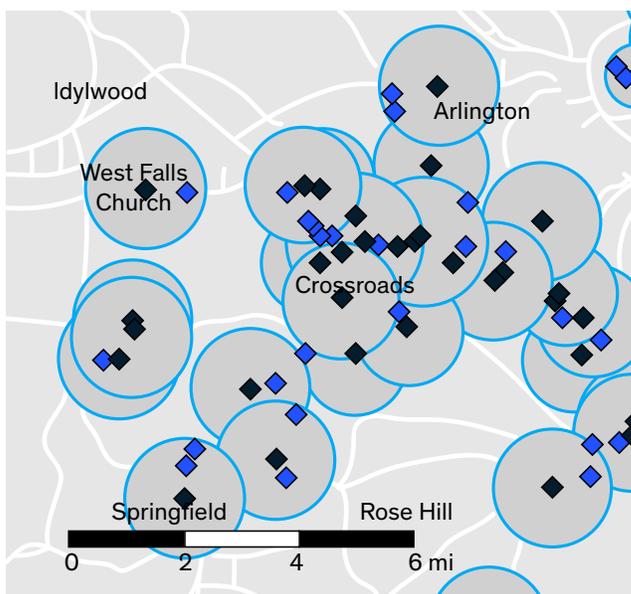
Tailor collaborations to a partner’s status. Food banks benefit from partnering with non-profits and for-profits alike. Many non-profits have strong existing relationships with community groups, and their name alone could serve as a draw to get people to sign up for services. Compliance requirements may also be easier to satisfy. For-profits, on the other hand, might have an edge with respect to innovative products or services that could benefit a food bank’s distribution system or clientele. Many food banks already have for-profit representatives on their boards, and could build on those relationships.

Decide which services to keep in-house. If part of a food bank’s service area includes a food desert—an area with few or no grocery stores—or contains areas without high-quality benefits providers or job training centers, it could be cheaper and more efficient for the food bank to simply offer its services there directly, rather than to partner with a third party.

Consider a potential partner’s ability to grow. Food banks may start a “food+” initiative by launching pilots. But if pilots are successful, they will grow. Any partner that a food bank teams up with has to be able to grow along with them, including both their physical plant and personnel.

Exhibit 1

Creating a hunger heat map can identify redundancies and gaps in where food is distributed.



Light Blue circle - 1 mile radius
Black square - Food-bank food distribution hubs
Blue square - Community food pantries

As part of expanding into “food+” services, CAFB analyzed its existing distribution network for gaps and redundancies.

The agency created a map to show how many of its neighborhood distribution partners were within a 1-mile radius of its major food distribution hubs, in order to identify areas that didn’t have enough coverage and areas with too many partners.

The food bank used the data to determine where to bring on new partners to fill gaps, cut back to remove redundancies, and where it might need to provide services directly.

identify the most promising food+ partner prospects in that group.

For the last piece of the puzzle, McKinsey helped CAFB calculate how many partners the food bank would need to bring on, by area and services provided, in order to reach its goal of providing full food+ coverage by 2025 (Exhibit 2).

With data in hand, the food bank determined that some groups it had brought on temporarily during the COVID-19 crisis could make good long-term partners. In addition, as the food bank reactivates former partners that shut down at the beginning of the pandemic, it is using the analysis to determine which to prioritize adding back, based on where the need is greatest.

As CAFB implements its food+ strategy, it is possible that some previous partners may not be interested or able to expand in ways that serve the community.

If such situations arise, it's important to ground conversations about partnership changes in the data and put the needs of the food bank's clients first, Muthiah said.

While Capital Area Food Bank's initiative is too new to draw conclusions about outcomes, it was important for the organization to "think holistically about its clients' needs, and tackle the economic disparities that exist in the region now rather than wait for the pandemic to end," she said. "If we aren't careful about how we rebuild, the opportunity gap in our region will widen."

Looking ahead

As more food banks seek to expand their service offering, four steps are needed to help food banks across the country scale food+ services.

Exhibit 2

One food bank must add a variety of partners to provide 'food+' services throughout its coverage area within the next 5 years.

How many new partners could be brought into the network by ...

	Current ¹	Future ²	Gap in current partners vs what's needed in 2025 ³	Reopening closed COVID partners? ⁶	Scaling up DPs that remained open? ⁷	Identifying new partners?
Total distribution partners (DPs)	185	254	72			
High-impact DPs⁴	43	67	28			
• Food only	41	37	0	0	0	0
• Food access	0	2	2	0	1	1
• Food + college	0	2	2	0	0	2
• Food + K-12 education	1	15	14	1	1	12
• Food + workforce development	0	1	1	0	0	1
• Food + health	1	9	8	0	3	5
• Food + behavioral health & housing	0	1	1	0	0	1
Neighborhood DPs⁵	142	187	44			

¹FY2021 forecast.

²Optimal footprint, volume FY2020 adjusted.

³Assumes retaining all partners brought on during COVID-19 crisis.

⁴High impact is defined as average distribution of more than 5,000 meals a month

⁵Average distribution of less than 5,000 meals a month

⁶Bringing back distribution partners that closed because of COVID-19.

⁷Helping neighborhood distribution partners become high-impact distribution partners.

First, more research is needed on the models that are the most effective, which can be done by testing hypotheses and deploying pilots. For example, in one Feeding America-sponsored pilot, Greeley noted food that pantry patrons can sign up for federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, as well as receive financial and other coaching. The pilot is testing the hypothesis that financial counseling is more successful “when paired with public benefits and food donations,” said Greeley. Moreover, food+ service offerings should be narrowly tailored to local community needs, which may vary by geography and region.

Second, best practices should be codified and shared across food banks. Feeding America took a step in formalizing a process to help food banks learn food+ practices from each other when it launched the Ending Hunger Community of Practice initiative several years ago. Today, the initiative includes 80

food banks that have committed to learning and testing various approaches meant to decrease the portion of the population dependent on charitable food donations. Continuing to expand this initiative, while sharing best practices and learnings from existing work like that of CAFB, can help accelerate the rate of food+ deployment.

Third, as models evolve and coalesce, nationwide partnerships can drive scale and consistency. Identifying at-scale partners that can assist food banks or their partners in providing complementary services like education and job training will be key. And fourth, food banks will have to continue to develop their own capacities to drive this organizationally. Expanding core services from storing, warehousing, and distributing food is not easy—but as Capital Area Food Bank is demonstrating, it can be done.

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