

# Executive Summary: Perspectives from Frontline Organizations in the Portland Metro Region On Addressing Food Insecurity During the Covid-19 Pandemic



Volunteers at Blanchett House, serving clients during the Covid-19 pandemic. Image from KGW.

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## Project Leads, Partners & Acknowledgments

The research effort was led by a PSU project team comprised of one faculty member and two students from the Toulon School of Urban Studies and Planning. Our primary client and audience for the project was the Regional Disaster Preparedness Organization (RPDO), and secondary clients were the City of Portland's Bureau of Planning and Sustainability (BPS). Thus, the report is written with them as the primary audience. However, we hope the report will be useful to a broader audience of policy and decision makers, and food system actors and advocates. Our efforts were informed by a Community Advisory Board. They met four times over the course of the project and offered advising on project goals and design and feedback on the report. We are grateful for their input. We also note that any errors or omissions in this report are the fault of the authors, and not of other partners.

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# Executive Summary

The main goal of this project was to contribute to an understanding of how frontline-serving food security organizations in the Portland region adapted during the COVID-19 pandemic and other emergencies in 2020-2022 and how they addressed increased rates of food insecurity among the region's residents. We discuss the experiences of these organizations in serving the region's food insecure residents, the many adaptations they made in the past few years, barriers experienced, and positive and critical reflections on local government.

We identify lessons learned and promising ideas for how to better prepare our region, in terms of regional food system resilience and community food security, for the next emergency. In articulating ideas for action, we specifically focus on the roles of local and regional quasi-governmental and governmental agencies, such as the Regional Disaster Preparedness Organization (RDPO) and the City of Portland, in collaboration with other actors like the federal government, and nonprofit and community-based organizations.

This report is part of a larger effort by RDPO to advance regional-scale food systems resilience planning in the Portland metropolitan regions. See more about that effort here:

<https://rdpo.net/regional-food-systems-resilience>

We identified over 200 anti-hunger organizations and other local and regional food systems actors- including regional and local food banks, school-based food pantries, meal programs, multi-service centers, farmers markets, direct market farmers, and other related organizations, many of them serving culturally specific communities- in the Portland metro region (See Appendix A). The number and scope of these organizations is on the one hand, extraordinary and inspiring, because it underscores that many leaders in our region are compassionate and committed to helping those in need. On the other hand, it is frustrating that even with all that effort, food insecurity rates remain stubbornly high in the region, at around 10% of residents (and higher during the pandemic). Rates are much higher among residents that face systemic oppressions and barriers to food security, including residents that have lower incomes, have lower levels of education, are Black, Native American, or Latino, and among households with children. Interviewees generally shared the awareness that their efforts will likely never actually solve the upstream causes of food insecurity.

This report synthesizes our findings from talking with over 40 leaders or staff at these organizations. We note that this report is long- nearly 90 pages! Its length mainly comes from the fact that it includes many detailed, rich direct quotes from our interviewees. We wanted to include their words, in their own voices, and to include many quotes to show the diversity of experiences and perspectives. This Executive Summary provides a more succinct summary of the highlights.

## Impacts to food insecurity

In terms of the impact on food security in the past two years, our interviewees reported increased demand and usage of their services. They saw many people, who had never needed their services before, now facing food insecurity for the first time. One staff member at a food pantry in Washington County described,

“When the pandemic first hit, both the volume of people that were in need and the differences between those people were very significant. So people who perhaps had not had to rely on those resources in the past for the first time were needing to access those resources.”

However, our interviewees emphasized that while the pandemic exacerbated the problem of food insecurity, the root vulnerabilities- poverty, low wages, lack of a sufficient government safety net, barriers to accessing assistance, high housing, transportation and other costs- were in place before the pandemic, and will continue afterward. One interviewee, a staff member at a food pantry in downtown Portland, reflected on how food insecurity intersects with other vulnerabilities like disabilities and houselessness:

“We also see people that have disabilities have experienced a lot more deprivation, loss of housing, suffering, fallen. Some people that we saw that were housed are no longer housed...So they required our services even before now they require them more so.”

For many of the region’s residents, the end of the pandemic will not signal the end of their food insecurity. Interviewees stressed that addressing these root vulnerabilities is key to avoiding increases in food insecurity during the next crisis.

## Adaptations

Frontline organizations continued, adapted, and/or initiated a wide range of interventions in the last two years to adapt to changing times and in order to meet the increasing food needs of the region’s residents. Their efforts worked to keep many people in the region from going hungry. As a region, we can appreciate the many leaders in our community whose leadership, creativity, hard work, and kindness ensured that most residents in our region could still access food, despite multiple compounding challenges and barriers stemming from many sources. This is something to celebrate, even though the region’s leaders themselves acknowledge they are unable to serve everyone.

Their adaptations included changing food sources in response to supply chain issues and sometimes to explicitly support local businesses and direct market and Black, Indigenous, and other culturally specific farmers. Many organizations implemented measures to limit community interactions. Many food banks and pantries and meal programs changed food distribution to appointment-based, delivery, and pre-packaged food boxes to reduce the risk of spreading viruses. Many of our interviewees described improvements by their organizations to be more responsive to client needs and to offer food that is more culturally relevant for their communities. One staff member at an organization serving Latino/a/x households in Portland described,

“We would always end up with a lot of food we would take to fridges... I started figuring out that it's because the food that we get or the food that food banks have aren't really culturally appropriate for the families or they don't use the ingredients that are available to them. I've seen a lot of that shift, we're really trying to cater to what the families need.”

In addition to the adaptations made during the pandemic, many organizations also had to modify operations to keep staff and clients as safe as possible during the smoke and heat events of summer 2020 and 2021.

Not all of the adaptations were easy. As one example, one interviewee, a staff member at a food pantry and free food market in downtown Portland, described their challenges adapting to losing a key source of food donations.

“And then Amazon was the partner that was making up the biggest difference, and they shut one of their locations down. So we've had to add to gleaning staff positions to be able to manage the labor side of food sourcing, in addition to spending a record amount of money on food.”

But some interviewees described their positive adaptations. As one example, a staff member at an organization doing gleaning and food rescue in Portland, described:

“We got an influx of donations in 2020 which allowed us to partner with some local farms to purchase produce...So we worked with a BIPOC farm ... and developed this really wonderful partnership with them that we're doing again this year and we support their small farm through their growing season. And then we also can provide really high quality produce to families, which I'm pretty proud of that piloting program because it's just something we've never experienced before.”

## Supports and Barriers

Interviewees appreciated the supports that made their efforts possible, like community response, increased funding from government, foundations, and private donors, expanded SNAP and other social safety nets, immense effort by volunteers, staff and Board members, and collaborations with other organizations with similar missions. As an example, a staff member at an organization providing free hot meals in downtown Portland, described,

“... the pandemic also heightened everybody's awareness. So, we've exploded in our support; volunteers, financial donations, food donations, care-kits, hygiene supplies, Amazon wishlist donations. Our metrics are through the roof. So that's the good news.”

At the same time, interviewees highlighted the many barriers they faced to being effective at addressing food security. Such barriers included insufficient and unreliable funding, rigid funding requirements, reduced staff and volunteer capacity, complex and changing health/sanitation requirements and expectations, lack of appropriate infrastructure, food distribution challenges including communicating with diverse clients and meeting their needs in a culturally respectful way, supply chain challenges with food and packaging, stress and burn-out, and additional challenges resulting from the smoke events and heat dome. As an example of reduced staff capacity, one staff member at a suburban farmers market identified as a top barrier:

“...staff capacity. I don't know that we can get past that one enough to see what the other barriers are. We have, in the last 12 months, had almost 100 percent turnover...  
...turnover is hard. Turnover gets really hard when you're trying to get through crisis.”

Above all, interviewees faced the barrier of being unable to address many of the other connected and often harder to solve fears and problems experienced by their clients, like lack of affordable housing and access to mental health services and substance use treatment. Many interviewees expressed concern

“The mental health and substance abuse crisis...has significantly increased the amount of drug induced hostility and psychosis... we want to make sure that when we're bringing 60 people inside to eat, that it is a safe and healthy environment for everybody who's there, especially the people we're serving and the people who are in particular in crisis. So that's really been the limiting factor for us, not so much COVID.... we're not serving the same community we were serving before the pandemic, they are markedly changed for the worse.” (Staff member at a meal program in inner Portland)

Direct market farmers faced particular barriers, some of them stemming from long-time challenges like insecure land tenure and low wages. Many felt left out of pandemic and extreme weather emergency relief programs, or found them inadequate for their needs. ON top of their own financial viability concerns, Farmers worry about the impacts of climate change to their ability to continue feeding their communities.

## Reflections on Local Government

Interviewees identified some ways that local and regional governments in particular helped them during the pandemic, including funding, resources, and leadership. On the whole, however, many expressed frustration about the lack of communication, leadership, and respect from the government, the barriers embedded in the supports offered, the lack of accountability, the lack of repair from past harms (e.g. land theft and slavery and pressure on low wages) and the inattention to long-term solutions. Almost every interviewee observed a leadership vacuum. While not all interviewees trust government, many did see a potential value in more proactive local and regional governance for food resilience in the face of increasing, interconnected disasters.

## Lessons Learned and Big Ideas

Interviewees reflected on all the lessons learned, including that many regional efforts worked to lessen hunger, and those should be commended. We are grateful to the region's over 200 food systems organizations for doing good work in keeping people fed. However many of the region's residents are increasingly vulnerable, with high housing costs, inflation, systemic oppressions, and other pressures. We as a region are not well prepared in terms of regional food security and resilience, especially in the face of climate change. Interviewees stressed that frontline organizations, forced into being the safety net for thousands of the region's residents, need more support. They called for more flexible funding, so they can address burnout and continue to adapt, innovate and collaborate, especially in ways that better serve client's cultural needs, promote food justice, and nurture the local food system. At the same time, many interviewees view their efforts as band-aids only and want to see more coordinated leadership, strategic policy and other interventions to reduce poverty and otherwise address the root causes of food insecurity.

Interviewees had some big ideas for how the Regional Disaster Preparedness Organization, the City of Portland and other local and regional governmental actors could provide leadership on regional food resilience. They called for:

1. Local and/or regional food systems governance, including a shared plan, form for collaborating and convening, elected official support, resources, government staff, and possibly a food policy council. Some saw this main task of such governance as to manage the food system as a kind of public infrastructure, like watersheds.
2. Proactive emergency planning that also build regional food systems capacity.
3. Addressing poverty, housing and other basic needs alongside food,

They also identified specific policy and programming ideas, including:

1. Coordinate and support hubs for people that are food insecure and those able to help,
2. Facilitated convening for frontline organization to connect, build relationships, engage in shared learning, and do collective, aligned work,
3. Connect anti-hunger efforts to more upstream interventions like equitable economic development and local food systems,
4. Incentivize and enable repurposing of food that might get wasted, and
5. Improve physical access to food and anti-hunger organizations.

For a more detailed review, visit the full report.