

# BALTIMORE CITY COVID-19 FOOD ENVIRONMENT BRIEF

November 2020



Chris Ryer  
Director of Planning

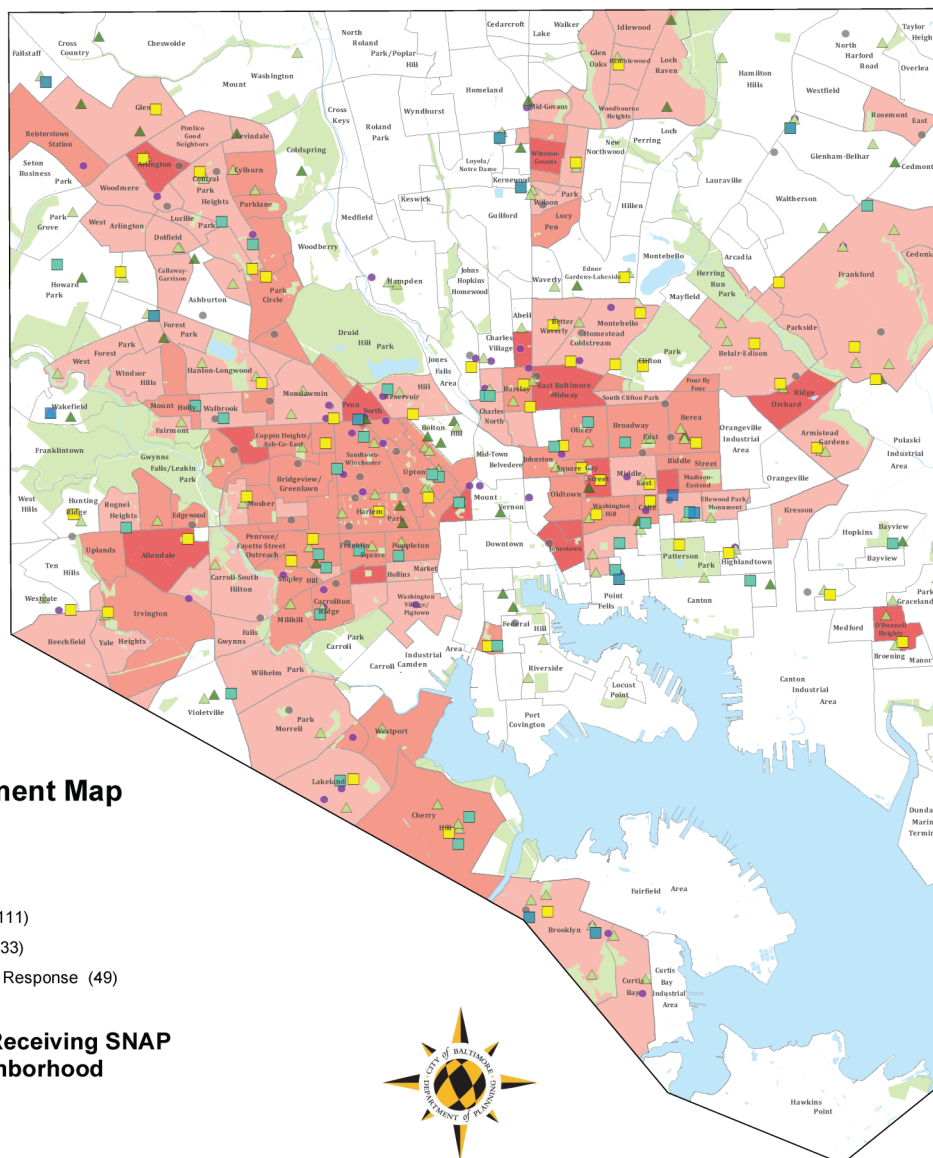


Bernard C. "Jack" Young  
Mayor

## TARGETED STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE FOOD SECURITY

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the City of Baltimore developed a comprehensive Emergency Food Strategy involving many city agencies and critical nonprofit, business, and community partners. The food security response is based on four key pillars: (1) distribute grocery, (2) distribute meals, (3) protect and maximize federal nutrition benefits, and (4) build food system resilience through urban agriculture.

The map below depicts the wide network of distribution sites for meals, food boxes, and other food resources. Since April, 9 million pounds of food boxes and 5.7 million meals have been provided at over 400 sites and through home delivery. As food insecurity escalates, SNAP participation has risen to nearly one third of Baltimore residents. Mapping areas with higher concentrations of SNAP, among other factors, guides the response.



November, 2020



## FOOD DISTRIBUTION

### Sites

66

#### PRODUCE BOXES

Nearly 200,000 produce boxes (4.5 million pounds) have been distributed by Coastal Sunbelt and Common Market from June to October 2020. Boxes average 20 pounds of fresh fruit and vegetables.

12

#### GROCERY BOXES

More than 122,000 grocery boxes (3.6 million pounds) have been distributed from April to October 2020. Boxes contain 30 pounds of shelf-stable food from the Maryland Food Bank. Home-delivered grocery boxes are available for older adults and residents impacted by COVID-19.

38

#### MIXED FOOD BOXES

Beginning in September, to help fill the “center of the plate” needs of food insecure residents, 36,700 mixed boxes (1.1 million pounds) of meat, dairy, and produce have been distributed by Saval Foods.

33

#### OLDER ADULT MEALS

The Baltimore City Health Department (BCHD) and partners are providing home delivered meals to approximately 2,300 older adults weekly and have served over 1.7 million meals between April and October 2020. The sites on the map represent residential facilities with multiple participants.

111

#### YOUTH GRAB AND GO MEALS

With school in session virtually, students can receive meals at 83 schools, 9 rec centers, and other community sites. On average, more than 100,000 meals are distributed per week and over 4 million meals have been served between March and October 2020.

49

#### COMMUNITY DRIVEN RESPONSE

Community members and organizations saw an urgent need and responded with various food resources.

59

#### FOOD PANTRIES

The Maryland Food Bank has entered Phase 2 of its pandemic response while also working to restart standard programming and operations.

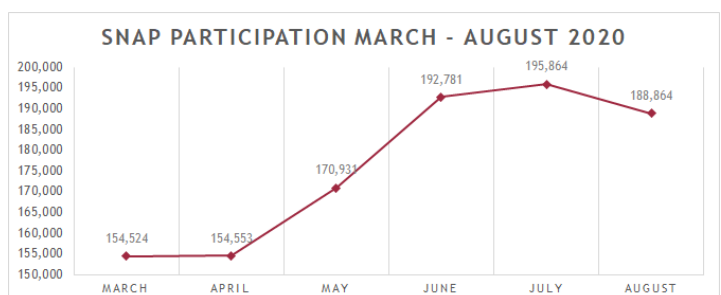
## SNAP

**Current Enrollment:** As of August 2020, over 188,800, or nearly one in three, Baltimore City residents participated in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), a 22% increase in participation compared to March 2020 when COVID-19 first appeared.

**Applications:** April 2020 saw a 600% increase in SNAP applications as unemployment skyrocketed and program restrictions were eased. Not everyone who applied was eligible.

**Participation:** Due to the dramatic increase in applications, there was a significant lag in the time it took for participants to be enrolled, reflected by the large increase in June.

**Need:** Increases in SNAP participation indicate a rise in food insecurity, however, these data do not capture the full need among vulnerable populations, such as immigrants or certain older adults, who are unable to access federal and state resources because they do not apply or are ineligible. Decreases in participation do not necessarily mean that need has decreased at the same rate, but could be due to program rules or limits.





## EVOLVING EMERGENCY FOOD STRATEGY AND TRENDS

The City of Baltimore continues to expand, evaluate, and adapt its Emergency Food Strategy to the trends of COVID-19 to prevent hunger among vulnerable residents as the pandemic continues and resources ebb and flow.

**Role of Community:** Early community distributions showed that these were high-demand sites that filled gaps, and the organizations were good partners in maintaining safe distributions. Additionally, community organizations asked for food resources from the City, which could use federal funding or reimbursement to pay for it.

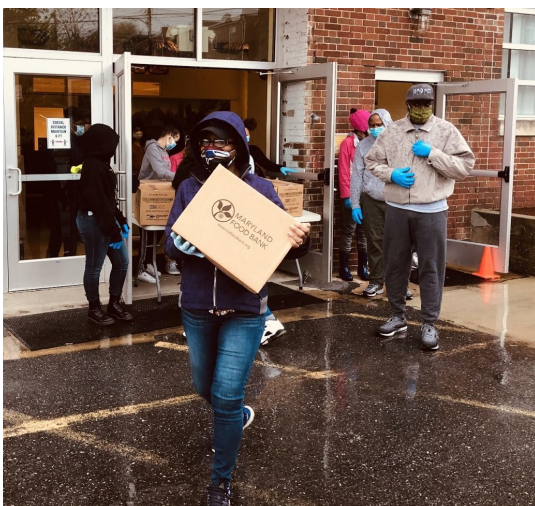
**Demand for Fresh Product:** Early on, the response focused on shelf-stable food since much of the food pantry system was shuttered. Over time, the need and demand for fresh and perishable products became clear, and the City's strategy shifted towards distributing produce boxes and then incorporated mixed boxes. At first, produce and then mixed boxes were provided free of cost by the USDA Farmers to Families program. When those programs concluded in Baltimore, the City contracted with suppliers to maintain the flow of fresh food.

**Personal Protective Equipment:** It was critical for all distribution sites to have masks for staff and volunteers to maintain safety. The Department of Planning, BCHD and the Department of Transportation collaborated to deliver masks to any community organization conducting food distribution, providing 122,850 masks to food sites.



**Emphasis on Home Delivery:** As an early-identified vulnerable population, the older adults strategy has focused on home-delivered food. To keep more people home, the City partnered with Amazon Flex to deliver grocery and produce boxes. Outreach and targeted referral mechanisms for home delivery were implemented in COVID-19 hot spots and among particularly vulnerable populations to minimize the need for residents to access public distribution sites.

**Data-Informed Response:** Geographic and population health gaps are continually assessed through mapping, box distribution data, analysis of SNAP participation, analysis of vulnerable populations such as immigrant families, and conversations with community leaders.



**Mapping:** Historically, the City has used the Healthy Food Priority Area map and food environment data to show food access needs. However, with the pandemic causing widespread unemployment, supply chain issues, and increasing other barriers to access, this indicator became less relevant. SNAP applications reached a record high in April 2020, flagging SNAP as a critical indicator to follow and map through the pandemic.

**Meal Program Flexibility:** Existing meal programs have anchored the food strategy, and waivers and flexibilities have been key to success. Federal waivers on non-congregate feeding, allowing parents to pick up on behalf of their children and pick up multiple meals at a time, the emergency provisions and the extension of the Summer Food Service program, and others were crucial.



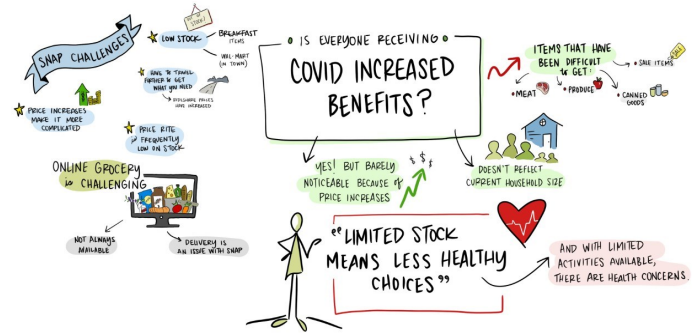


## KEY HIGHLIGHTS

### RESIDENT FOOD EQUITY ADVISORS

The Resident Food Equity Advisors (RFEA) work with the Baltimore Food Policy Initiative (BFPI) to collectively drive equitable food policies through an inclusive, resident-led process. Advisors apply and are paid for their time.

The 2020 RFEA cohort represented 13 residents of public housing from each of the Housing Authority of Baltimore City family developments. When COVID-19 hit during the middle of the cohort's term, meetings were shifted to virtual and Advisors gave feedback on produce and grocery boxes and their experiences in navigating getting food during a pandemic. Their input provides BFPI with insight into the functionality of Online SNAP, the state of the food pantry system, and the need for considering water and allergen-friendly options in food boxes. RFEA feedback emphasized the importance of having resources like food pantries and community gardens on-site at public housing developments, especially in situations like the pandemic. Full RFEA recommendations will be released this winter.



### FOOD PAC ADAPTS TO COVID-19

In addition to financial and food resources, many organizations — especially those doing food outreach for the first time — expressed a need for relationships, networking, and connections during the pandemic. BFPI adapted its Food Policy Action Coalition (Food PAC) to meet monthly, rather than quarterly, for more frequent opportunities for partners to connect and to understand how their pandemic response fits in the context of the larger food environment. Nearly 100 organizations and individuals have signed up to be part of Food PAC since the beginning of the pandemic. Feedback from the organizations has guided the City's response, the City has shared considerable resources with Food PAC members, and many organizations have supported one another.

### BALTIMORE CONVENTION CENTER SERVES AS HUB



Since early May, the Baltimore Convention Center (BCC) has played a vital role in Baltimore City's COVID-19 Emergency Food Response. The convention center was the City's main food distribution center for grocery boxes and produce boxes delivered to resident homes through a partnership with Amazon Flex. BCC provided six staff and 30,000 square feet for the distribution and storage of grocery boxes. To date, over 12,000 grocery boxes and 7,500 produce boxes have been delivered to homes through BCC - totaling more than 200 tons of food.

## ABOUT THE FOOD POLICY AND PLANNING DIVISION

The Food Policy and Planning Division of the Department of Planning oversees the Baltimore Food Policy Initiative (BFPI). During COVID-19, the Food Policy Director and team of Food Planners: 1) lead the strategic planning for the food security response; 2) conduct mapping and data analysis; 3) oversee the produce, grocery, and mixed box strategies and implementation, including logistics, funding, community outreach, and site expansion; 4) coordinate with the Emergency Operations Center and state and federal agencies; 5) leverage significant public and private funds for food and transportation; 6) expedited Online SNAP and prevented 15,000 residents from losing SNAP; 7) convene Resident Food Equity Advisors and Food PAC; 8) and support urban agriculture and local food system resilience.

**CONTACT:** Holly Freishtat, Food Policy Director, [holly.freishtat@baltimorecity.gov](mailto:holly.freishtat@baltimorecity.gov)

**WEBSITE:** <https://planning.baltimorecity.gov/baltimore-food-policy-initiative>

**FOOD RESOURCES:** <https://coronavirus.baltimorecity.gov/food-distribution-sites>