

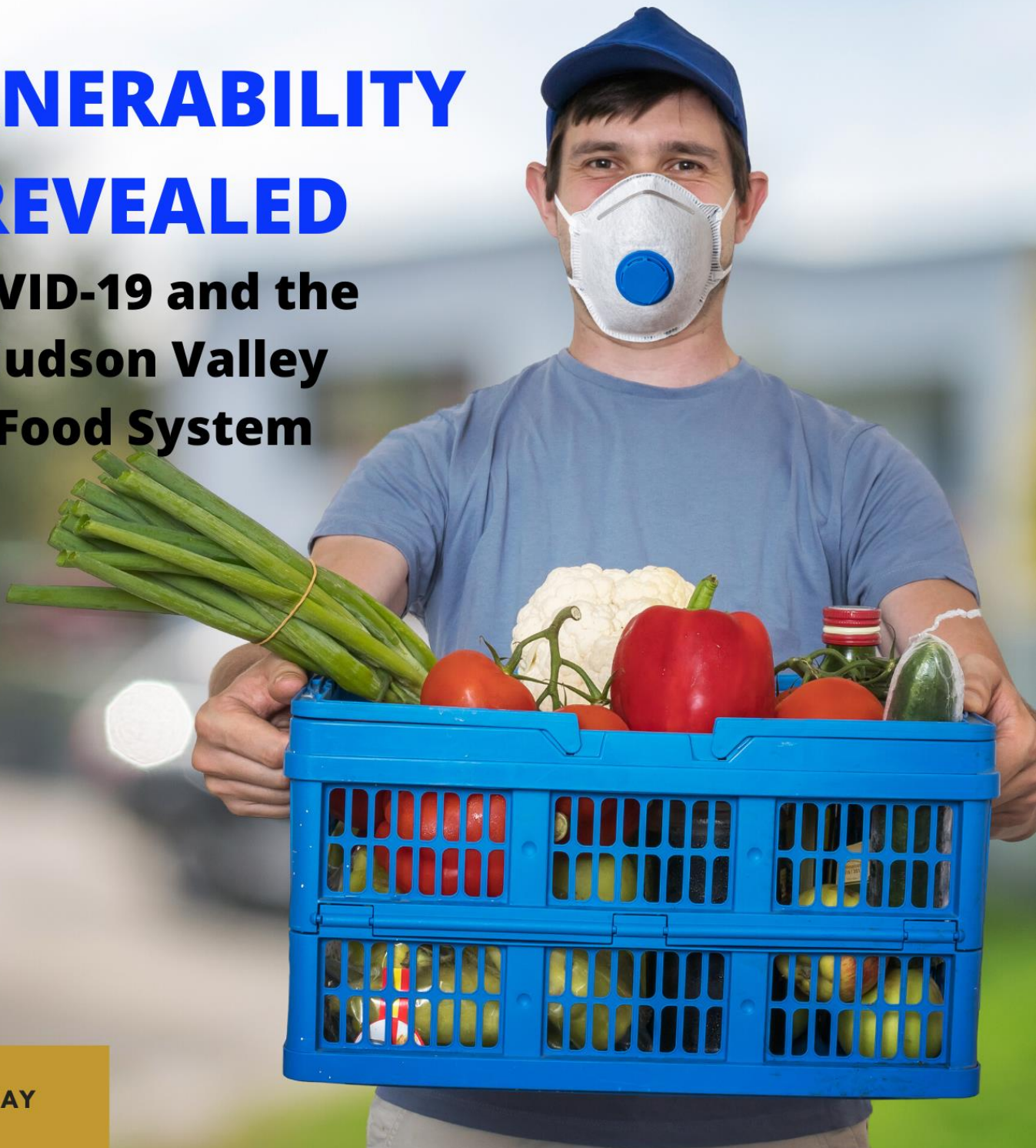


# Issue Briefs in the Time of the Pandemic

HUDSON VALLEY **PATTERN** *for* **PROGRESS**

## **VULNERABILITY REVEALED**

**COVID-19 and the  
Hudson Valley  
Food System**



2020 | MAY

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# INTRODUCTION

The recent news is full of images from across the country of people waiting in long lines that sometimes stretch for miles to pick up groceries from drive through food pantries. Food banks, local governments, and others who help with food access are overwhelmed by the sudden rise in need. Here in the Hudson Valley, county and municipal governments have redirected resources to meet the urgent and dire situation of food insecurity, and many others have joined the effort to assist those most in need.

Not only are millions of Americans struggling to afford to put food on the table, the food supply chain that we all rely on for our groceries is facing disruptions. Large meat processing plants in Pennsylvania and South Dakota among others temporarily closed in response to workers who have tested positive for the Coronavirus. These plants are major suppliers in the production of America's food: Smithfield Foods, the plant in South Dakota produces 130 million servings of food per week<sup>i</sup>. The boardroom chair of the behemoth meat producer Tyson Foods, warned that, "millions of pounds of meat will disappear from the supply chain" upon the closing of some of the company's processing plants<sup>ii</sup>. As a response to these closures and the threat to the food supply, in an executive order under the Defense Protection Act, President Trump declared meat processing plants "critical infrastructure". With this order, meat companies are asked to follow physical distancing and safety guidelines and to keep operations running<sup>iii</sup>. Meat packing workers and their organizing unions have expressed concerns about the safety of workers if they return to work without mandatory protections<sup>iv</sup>.

Meanwhile, farmers across the country, including here in the Hudson Valley, are throwing away enormous quantities of food that they are unable to sell, as their wholesale customers - restaurants, hotels and institutions like schools - are no longer buying. Dairy farmers are pouring truckloads full of milk down the drain and fresh grown vegetables are being buried in the soil. In some cases, farmers are able to donate the food, but more often than not the food spoils before it can be given away.

The food system in this country is a complex web. Several components of this web are beginning to fail due to the current crisis. These failures have ripple effects throughout the system that affects food access for consumers.

For the most vulnerable populations, life may not look that much different than it did prior to the appearance of COVID-19: many in this group have not had enough to eat, safe housing, or employment opportunities for a long time. On the other end of the spectrum are those that are still employed, and able to keep up with their necessary expenses. Then there are those who exist somewhere in the middle. These people, perhaps, had a job prior to the pandemic but earned low wages, had little savings, and now find themselves out of work. For some families, school closures mean kids who would normally eat breakfast and lunch at school are now dependent on getting these meals at home, this pushes family food budgets beyond their limit, and therefore they may be skipping meals or reducing their intake. For perhaps the first time, those in this group are utilizing existing social safety nets and taking food donations.

***From every direction, the food system is stressed.*** Where it is nimble, the system reconfigures itself to meet the changing need. Where the system is too complex to easily change, there have been and will continue to be failures that result in large amounts of food waste. For at least the next few months, but more likely for the next year at least, the economic fallout of COVID-19 means a growing number of people will need food assistance. Unsung heroes work tirelessly to ensure people in the Hudson Valley region have enough food to eat, but the crisis may continue to worsen and the sustainability of their efforts may be jeopardized.

COVID-19 is socially and economically devastating, and is illuminating the severity of food insecurity in this country. The pandemic also provides an opportunity to learn from what is going well and what needs improvement, particularly how the large centralized supply chain system has weaknesses that are now becoming apparent.

This report explores the issue of food insecurity in the Hudson Valley and recent disruptions to the food supply due to COVID-19, and the response from government and other entities.

## ADDRESSING HUNGER NOW

### Call to Action

- Visit your county's website for COVID-19 information and resources for food
- Visit the Hudson Valley Food Bank website. From there you can see
  - How to make a donation
  - Volunteer opportunities – volunteers are needed desperately as many of those who gave their time are in the age cohort that should be staying home
  - A list of entities who need help by county
- Give families in need gift cards to local food retail stores. This subsidizes the work of local organizations and helps out the local economy for elderly neighbors
- When you cook meals, cook extra and pack it for someone in need

The following is a list of the best practices/actions to meet the goal of a more resilient food system during unusual times like the present but also going forward.

### Support for the Food System

- Grants or low interest loans program to fund the costs for businesses to respond to COVID-19
- Grants or low interest loans program for food producers to make new hires to increase the level of food production
- Grants or low interest loans for small food producers to pivot in order to survive under the conditions of a pandemic and ensure safe working conditions through the provision of personal protective equipment, split shifts, etc.
- Encourage local food producers to make donations of surplus food with tax incentives on top of existing tax deductions
- Investment in shared infrastructure including a network of storage facilities in each county to support the distribution and storage of donated food from producers to food pantries, as a model look at Ulster County's Farm to Food Pantry collaborative
- Short-term infrastructure repurposing – utilize existing refrigeration to transport and store emergency food. Restaurants that are temporarily closed can gain small revenue or tax breaks by renting their walk in refrigerators.
- Create forums for local agricultural businesses to share best practices

- Adaptive reuse of open commercial spaces - With the possible increase in “work from home capabilities” repurpose vacant commercial space for “indoor farming”; grow tropical fruits and other foods outside the Hudson Valley growing zone here in the Hudson Valley. Using urban locations would also be beneficial in getting healthy foods to a demographic who might not so easily have access.
- Modify pilot online SNAP program to extend the use of benefits to local online food producers and local distributors (small farms, farmers’ markets, local grocery chains, etc.). Currently the benefits can only be used online at Amazon and a few other suppliers.
- Allow locally owned restaurants to deliver meals under the SNAP system
- Plan for fall agricultural tourism season
- Develop a program where students reach out to farmers to help during harvest season

## Assistance for Those in Need

- Collaborations between non-profits, local government, school districts on food assistance
- Set up a 24-hour call number for those facing food insecurity to connect to available services
- County governments establish a fund that offers grants to organizations that aid with food access.
- County and municipal websites include updated information on SNAP, school breakfast and lunch distribution programs, and opportunities for the public to volunteer and/or donate food. During a crisis this information should be easily accessible from the homepage
- Municipal governments partner with private groups and create a program that provides funding for gift cards from local restaurants for food insecure families, like the NourishALL program in the City of New Rochelle
- Utilize social media to get the word out about efforts to help community.
- Stop food waste by “rescuing” it from the garbage. This is what the Farm to Food Pantry Collaborative does- as well as Second Chance Foods in Putnam, City Harvest in NYC and Feed HV. Some of these programs use an app, volunteers, and a network of food donors and non-profit food recipients to divert good food from the garbage to community food pantries.
- Large grocery store chains purchase from food producers that have lost wholesale market sales, like the grocery chain Publix<sup>®</sup>, donate surplus to local food pantries
- Plan for future disasters and the provision for emergency food.
- Implement a financial monitoring system to mitigate “price gouging” during difficult economic times to allow those with limited financial resources to access foods



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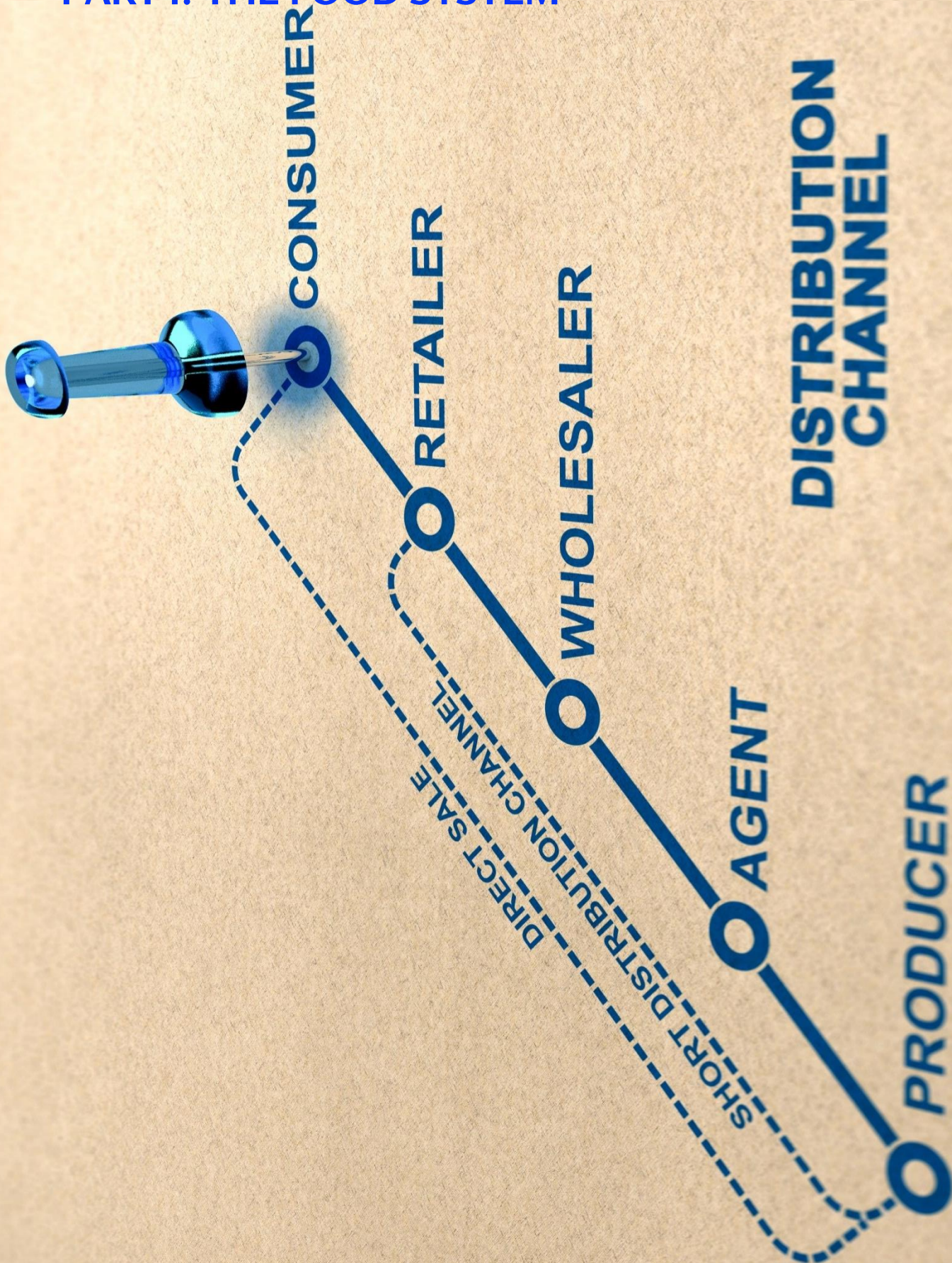
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## PART I: THE FOOD SYSTEM





# Disruptions to the Food Supply

## *Producers Have to Pivot*

Pattern spoke with Maire Ullrich, Agriculture Program Leader for the Cornell Cooperative Extension of Orange County on the topic of disruptions to the food system due to the pandemic. Our food comes from a system of growers, transporters, processing plants, and distribution centers, most operating under tight budgets and with little waste. Ullrich explained that the food system's refined efficiency makes it less flexible. As a result of the pandemic, consumption habits and the demand for food have changed. As restaurants, hotels, schools, and other institutions closed, the wholesale market many producers depended on for sales, dried up. This disruption is enormous.



*Americans are now consuming almost all of their meals at home. For a dairy farmer this means children are not drinking milk from ½-pint size containers in the school cafeteria but now from gallon containers at home.*

*Pivoting from one product, wholesale packaged school milk, to another, grocery store milk gallons, is not easy.*

*This shift requires a change in packaging, processing, re-routing the transportation of a product, and finding a new distribution option.*

In Sullivan County, Brey's Egg Farm normally sells 80 percent of its eggs to wholesale customers. Closure of restaurants means Daniel Brey, the third generation in his family to own the farm, must find new customers to buy the large quantity of eggs that the farm produces. Brey has been able to sell to several grocery stores in Sullivan County and to Adams Fairacre Farms in Orange County, having to change the packaging in order to do so<sup>vi</sup>. In the last couple of weeks, Brey also started to sell some eggs to the Food Bank of the Hudson Valley. He would like to find more food retail stores in the region to buy his eggs, and would ask people to make a request at their grocery store for Brey's Eggs. According to the farm website, there is "no shortage of eggs at Brey's Eggs."

Brey is concerned about the long-term impacts that the pandemic will have on his business. The restaurants that normally purchase from him may or may not make it through the crisis. Additionally, he fears that several of the restaurant food suppliers he works with might not be around after the pandemic is over. He has concerns for the health of his employees as well. The egg farm is taking all necessary precautions to protect workers but Brey still worries about what would happen if one of his employees contracts the coronavirus. As the farm struggles through this crisis, it is unclear whether this local food producer will be able to hang on.



Not all farms are experiencing this pandemic in the same way. The small 10-acre Blue Star Farm in Columbia County reported a 25-30% increase in sales from the same time last year<sup>vii</sup>. With online ordering, farm stands, farmer's markets, and community supported agriculture (CSA), small farms are able to make a switch and sell directly to the consumer.

Brookby Farms, in Dutchess County near the Connecticut border, is a dairy farm that has been in the Vincent family for seven generations. Steve Vincent and his family, transformed the farm from a conventional industrial farm that sent milk away in a truck to a large processing plant, into an in-house producer of raw milk sold locally. When the COVID-19 crisis first began, the Vincents were extremely concerned about what would happen to their small business. They worried about how they would continue distributing their product and quickly developed an online sales option. To their surprise, there has been a growth in business over the last month as people took advantage of the online purchasing option. The customers seem to appreciate that they do not have to go into a grocery store to get their milk and the farm is offering delivery for those who need it. Under normal operations, the dairy farm sells its extra milk to a cheesemaker. The Vincents worried that this revenue would dry up if the cheesemaker were no longer able to sell their product. The cheesemaker primarily sells to restaurants that are temporarily closed. Fortunately, the cheesemaker also quickly adapted to the situation and found he could sell his product through online farmers markets in New York City. So far, the Vincents have had to work hard to keep up with the situation but are managing to do alright, as is the small cheesemaker – neither has had to throw out any product. This strategy has proven effective for a small dairy producer but may not be applicable to dairies that rely more on the large-scale dairy cooperative system.

The Catskills Food Hub in Sullivan County is playing a critical role in helping local farmers transition from the wholesale market they normally rely on to a growing retail market. They offer a retail program where customers are able to place an order through an online marketplace once a week. Since the beginning of the pandemic, the demand has grown by around 600 %, as people are increasingly interested in food that comes from a known source. The Catskills Food Hub provides a means for growers to connect to customers and manages this shift, and helps producers modify inventory in order to satisfy retail preferences that are different from that of wholesale. For example, a wholesale customer would normally purchase a crate of carrots or twenty pounds of potatoes, but a retail customer does not need this large quantity. They also started working with new food producers including Brey's Eggs. It is extremely fortuitous that the Catskills Food Hub officially opened in time to help local farmers through this challenging time.



*Photo from Cornell Cooperative Extension | Sullivan County*

## Processing and Transport



Ullrich explained that ***the major bottlenecks in the food system, now, are processing and transport.***

Processing plants transform raw products like milk or animals into products that we consume. Some processing plants are unable to stay open due to a reduced workforce that is not sufficient to continue operations. In some instances, employees tested positive for the virus and the entire plant closed down as a precaution to stop the spread, as happened with the meat processing plant in South Dakota. In other cases, there are not enough employees coming to work as some stay home to take care of kids who are out of school and others stay home out of fear of the virus. Food processing plants typically operate on such narrow margins that there is not a surplus of workers to sustain

the depleted workforce. This has forced many plants to close. In the Hudson Valley there are also not enough local processing and distribution facilities, so disruptions to national operations leave local producers with no options for those services.

The transportation of food from grower to processor and then to distributor is an important component of the system that has been impacted by COVID-19. According to Ullrich, there were not enough Class A licensed drivers before the pandemic and now there is a shortage since many of these workers are also staying home. Concerns have been raised with regard to the inability for drivers to obtain licenses during this period. Truck drivers are essential to the functioning of our food system and consumers will certainly feel a shortage of drivers<sup>viii</sup>.

## Labor Shortages

Ullrich said that since the growing season is just beginning here in the Hudson Valley, produce farmers have not felt the impact of the pandemic. She thinks the major concern for produce farmers will be labor. ***Under the H-2A Temporary Agriculture Program, growers depend on foreign workers to pick and package their crops. Disruptions to visa processing, due to the virus, has already created a shortage of workers in the program.*** Additionally, President Trump's recent actions to suspend immigration will likely worsen farmers' ability to find enough workers to pick crops. The U.S. Citizenship and Immigrations Services website had the following statement on April 22<sup>nd</sup> concerning the H-2A Temporary Agricultural Program:

"On April 20, 2020, the Department of Homeland Security and USCIS published a temporary final rule to amend certain H-2A requirements to help U.S. agricultural employers avoid disruptions in lawful agricultural-related employment, protect the nation's food supply chain, and lessen impacts from the coronavirus (COVID-19) public health emergency.

Due to travel restrictions and visa processing limitations as a result of actions taken to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, as well as the possibility that some H-2A workers may become unavailable due to COVID-19 related illness, U.S. employers who have approved H-2A petitions or who will be filing H-2A petitions might not receive all of the workers requested to fill the temporary positions, and similarly, employers that currently employ H-2A workers may lose the services of workers due to COVID-19 related illness"

Farmworkers are central to our food supply system, especially in big produce growing areas like California, Florida and Texas. Farm laborers pick Hudson Valley apples and other types of locally grown produce. Farmworkers generally earn low wages, are often undocumented and often reside in group housing. Given these conditions, it will be difficult for most farmworkers to “stay home” safely. In the Eastern Coachella Valley of California, in a date farm’s processing plant, a small group of farmworkers all tested positive for coronavirus<sup>ix</sup>. As of now, there are no known outbreaks of the coronavirus among farmworkers in the Hudson Valley, but we have already seen minority low-income communities disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. ***An outbreak within a farmworker population is possible and would cause further disruptions to the food supply chain.***

## *Food Distribution and Groceries*

The distribution point in the food supply system is where the food meets the consumer. COVID-19 has impacted distribution needs; shoppers are stocking their pantries and now consume more meals at home using food procured from the grocery store. In Peekskill, a centrally located downtown grocery store closed its doors because of the issues related to the pandemic, leaving carless customers without a good brick and mortar option for food procurement. Most major grocery stores in the Hudson Valley region are open and have food but have not fully adjusted to the change in supply and demand, as evidenced by some of the empty shelves. With the temporary closures of processing plants across the country, there will likely be more empty shelves in the coming weeks.

Online grocery delivery, already on the rise before the pandemic, has grown in popularity. As a result, many of these services have failed to keep up with the increase in demand and some providers have long wait periods.

Whether it is a large chain like Shoprite or smaller operations like the Trading Post in Rock Hill or Beacon Natural Market in Beacon, many are now offering online ordering and curbside pickup for customers. Many small food growers and farmers’ markets such as Saunderskill in Accord, are also embracing online shopping options, a change that may be here to stay according to Sember Weinman of the Beacon Farmers’ Market.

For people who are unable to do their own grocery shopping there are on-line apps that allow them to hire someone to shop for them. One of these apps, Instacart, is criticized for failing to provide personal protective equipment to its shoppers, putting them and the consumers at risk<sup>x</sup> and paying a lower flat fee per order than before the pandemic<sup>xi</sup>. For others, who are unable to make trips to the grocery store, Instacart has been helpful as a means to procure groceries.

On the national level, some large grocery store chains are now allowing customers to use SNAP benefits for online purchasing and curbside pickup<sup>xii</sup>. However, most smaller grocery stores are not able to accept on-line SNAP benefits to date.



# The Hudson Valley Regional Food System and Food Insecurity

In 2019 The Office of the New York State Comptroller, Thomas P. DiNapoli, produced a Profile of Agriculture in New York State that utilized U.S. Department of Agriculture 2017 Census of Agriculture data. The highlights of that profile for the state were:

- New York farms generated \$5.7 billion in gross income in 2017, up more than 23 percent from a decade earlier. While agriculture is especially important in many upstate areas, farming takes place in all regions of the State.
- The State was home to more than 33,400 farms in 2017, and farmland was nearly 23 percent of New York's total land area.
- Most farmers in New York live on their farms, 96 percent of which are family-owned. Women represent a growing share, more than 37 percent, of farm producers.
- Milk is by far the State's largest agricultural commodity; New York ranks third nationally for milk sales. With 624,000 milk cows, the State leads the nation in the production of a variety of dairy products including cottage cheese, sour cream and yogurt.
- New York ranks second among the states for production of apples and maple syrup, and third for both wine and grapes.
- Among the State's top five counties ranked by farm sales, four are in the Finger Lakes or Central New York regions: Wyoming, Cayuga, Genesee and Wayne. Suffolk County on Long Island ranks fourth for farm sales.
- Emerging challenges for farmers include threats from climate change, such as summer heat stress, rain intensity and increased flooding risk.
- The State has created a variety of policy initiatives to address challenges to the agricultural sector, including efforts to limit local and state taxes on farmers and to help offset labor costs.

## Regional Hudson Valley Profile

The region includes Dutchess, Orange, Putnam, Rockland, Sullivan, Ulster, and Westchester counties, with over 2,200 farms and 317,000 acres of farmland. Over half of the farms and farmland are located in the counties of Dutchess and Orange. Farmland losses from 2007 to 2017 included over 16,000 acres in Ulster County, while over 12,000 acres of farmland were added in the counties of Orange, Putnam, Rockland and Sullivan. Putnam, Sullivan, and Westchester counties saw modest growth in the number of farms during the period.

The region ranks first in the State for the sale of horses, ponies and donkeys, with Dutchess County ranking second. Dutchess County also ranked fourth for the sale of Christmas trees and other woody products. Sullivan County is the second largest producer of poultry and eggs, while Orange County ranks third for vegetables, melons, and potatoes.

Pattern spoke with Megan Larmer, Director of the Regional Food Program at Glynwood Center for Regional Food and Farming (Glynwood) in Putnam County. Glynwood's mission is to help local farmers succeed as a way to achieve a robust regional food system, which is especially pertinent now. The success of small local farmers results in communities that are more self-reliant, and have access to healthier food, the prosperity of local economies, and the conservation of land for food production. One of the reasons our national food system is vulnerable is because there is a lack of redundancy within the system. Large corporations have taken greater and greater portions of the market making the entire system reliant on a smaller number of producers and processors. When one of the giant food producers fails, as is currently happening with the meat processing plant closures, the ripple effects are felt throughout much of the country. Conversely, when there are many small and medium size farms, if one farm closes, others can continue to feed into the system.

Long supply chains that involve many links between the food producer and the consumer are also more vulnerable than shorter chains (see chart below). Between each link there needs to be transport: the farmer to the processor to the distributor to the consumer. If one link in the chain is broken, it takes the system time to reconfigure and rebuild itself. As described above, the transport of food is currently stressed with a shortage of drivers and a shortage of refrigerated trucks. Shorter chains, where the producer sells directly to the consumer, are easier to rebuild if disrupted.

#### Long Supply Chain



#### Short Supply Chain



For the last several decades, there has been an effort, especially pronounced in some food growing regions like the Hudson Valley, toward the renewal of local food production. Farmers markets and CSAs are both models that allow the consumer to buy directly from the farmer. In a CSA, members buy a share of a farmer's seasonal production and each week throughout the season get a box of produce. Larmer, who heads the Hudson Valley CSA Coalition, said right now CSA membership is up 400% from before COVID-19 and is continuing to grow each week. The model is attractive at the moment



because people do not have to take a risk and go to the grocery store, the short supply chain means people know who has touched their food, and there is a level of certainty knowing that each week there will be a box of fresh produce. Farmers benefit from the CSA model because it provides capital at the beginning of the growing season that they can use to pay for seed, labor, and other food production expenses.

As important as a regional food system is, Larmer emphasized that smaller regional farmers are not seeing the federal support they need in order to make it through this challenging time. In order to pivot and survive during this crisis, small farms, like many small businesses, need financial support. There are increased costs to operating in the current moment: the provision of personal protective equipment, other safety measures such as more handwashing stations, splitting shifts in order to minimize the number of people working closely together, and other costs. Yet, many local farmers cannot benefit from recent federal stimulus packages including the Payroll Protection Program (PPP).

President Trump's recent declaration that meat processing is "critical infrastructure" is a clear statement that it is imperative to keep our food system going. Small regionalized operatives are an important part of the resiliency of the food system and should also be supported.



## PART II: FOOD INSECURITY



## Existing Food Insecurity in the Hudson Valley Prior to COVID-19

According to the United States Food and Drug Administration (USDA), food insecurity is when households struggle to access adequate food due to financial or resource limitations. Despite working full time, many Americans cannot afford their basic needs and have to choose between eating, shelter, and medical expenses. *Prior to the spread of COVID-19, around 37 million people, or 11.1 percent of the population in the United States experienced food insecurity. Of the 37 million, 11 million were children<sup>xiii</sup>.* The struggle to access food is more likely for families with children but is also a significant issue for many groups including seniors, minorities, rural communities, and people in poverty.

The USDA classifies families into groups based on the level of need: food secure, low food security and very low food security. Those with low food security do not necessarily have to reduce their intake but limit the variety of foods they eat due to financial restrictions. Those with very low food security, about 4.3 percent of the national population, have reduced food intake during the year due to financial constraints.

### Per Person Food Costs and the Annual Cost To Feed A Family Of Four?

	Per Person					=	FAMILY OF 4 ANNUAL MEAL COSTS
	AVERAGE COST PER MEAL	DAILY MEAL COSTS	WEEKLY MEAL COSTS	30 DAY MEAL COSTS	PERSON ANNUAL MEAL COST		
Columbia	\$3.21	\$9.63	\$67.41	\$288.90	\$3,505		\$14,021
Dutchess	\$3.44	\$10.32	\$72.24	\$309.60	\$3,757		\$15,026
Greene	\$3.59	\$10.77	\$75.39	\$323.10	\$3,920		\$15,681
Orange	\$3.38	\$10.14	\$70.98	\$304.20	\$3,691		\$14,764
Putnam	\$4.06	\$12.18	\$85.26	\$365.40	\$4,434		\$17,734
Rockland	\$3.36	\$10.08	\$70.56	\$302.40	\$3,670		\$14,676
Sullivan	\$2.85	\$8.55	\$59.85	\$256.50	\$3,112		\$12,449
Ulster	\$3.36	\$10.08	\$70.56	\$302.40	\$3,670		\$14,676
Westchester	\$3.66	\$10.98	\$76.86	\$329.40	\$3,997		\$15,987

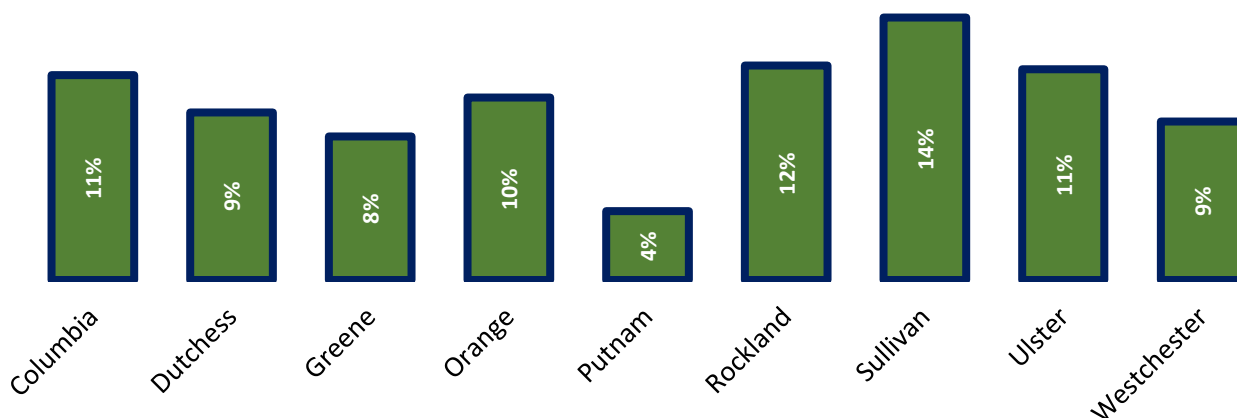
Source: 2017 [feedamerica.org](http://feedamerica.org) and calculations by Pattern for Progress

*A family of four in the Hudson Valley spends on average somewhere between \$12,000 and \$16,000 annually on meal costs.* This amount is a significant burden for low-income households. A full time worker who makes \$15/hour (\$2.50 more than New York State minimum wage) has an annual gross income of \$31,200. This family of four would spend between a third to a half of their income on food. Additionally those families, that are housing cost burdened, pay 30%-50% of their income for shelter. Under normal circumstances, let alone during a pandemic, families with this level of income likely have a difficult time affording basic needs.

To better understand the issues of food insecurity, Pattern talked with Paul Stermer, the director of the Food Bank of the Hudson Valley. Stermer shared his personal thoughts on why Americans face food insecurity, the vulnerabilities of our food system, and the growing need for food assistance due to the pandemic. According to Stermer, food insecurity issues are closely related to affordable housing, low wages, and health care costs. Stermer also pointed out that there are public safety nets like Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the National School Lunch Program, and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) among others, but these programs do not always meet the need.

In most of the counties in the Hudson Valley region, around one in ten families receive SNAP. However, many families that need food assistance do not qualify for this federal assistance. In order to be eligible for SNAP benefits, a household's gross income must be at or below 130 percent of the poverty line, the net income must be at or below the poverty line, and assets (money in bank accounts, for example) must be of \$2,250 or less. The federal poverty line in fiscal year 2020 is \$1,778 per month for a family of three and 130 percent of this is \$2,311 a month. The poverty line is adjusted based on the size of families and higher assets are permitted for households with an elderly person or a person with a disability<sup>xiv</sup>.

### Percent of County Households That Receive SNAP Benefits



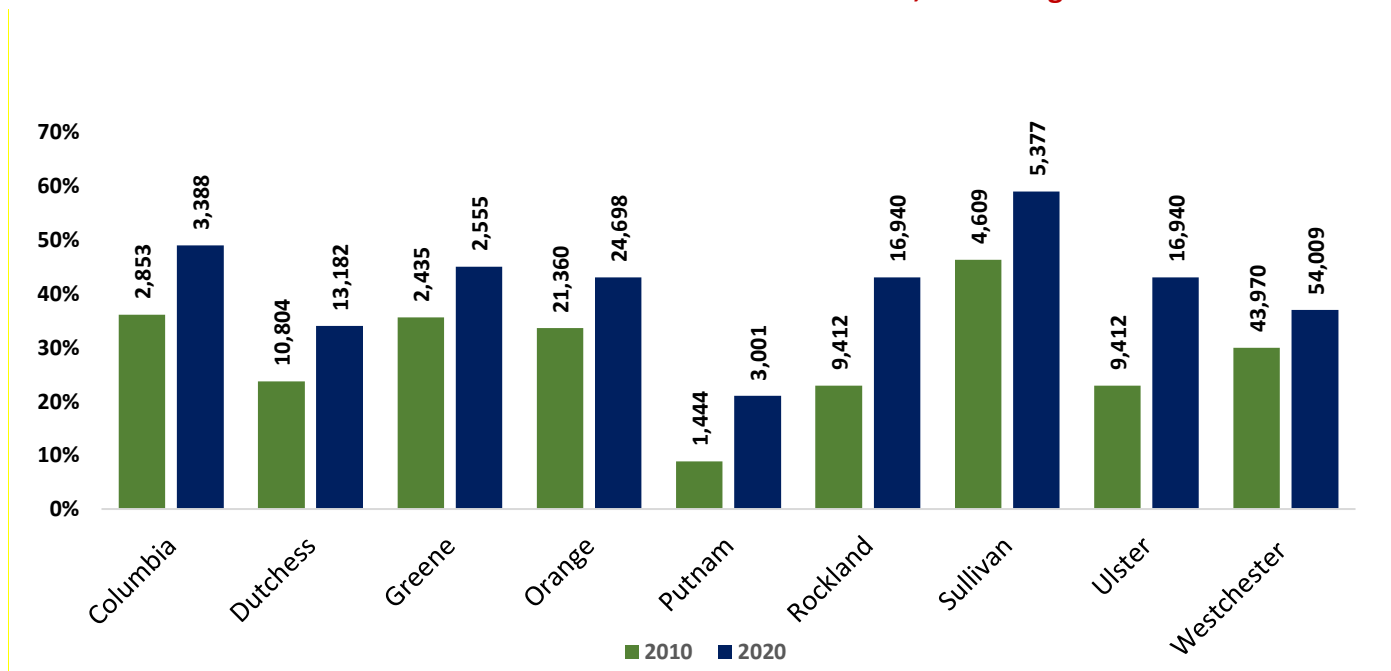
Source: 2018 ACS U.S. Census

When schools close in cases of emergency, as they have done during this pandemic, families that rely on the free or reduced lunch program may not be able to afford the cost of the food usually provided by the school. In all nine counties of the Hudson Valley region the number and percentage of K-12 students who receive free or reduced school lunch has risen in the last ten years. In every county, more that 20% of students participate in the program.

The issue of food insecurity for children is especially concerning. The Brookings Institute reports that during the COVID-19 pandemic nearly one in five of all American households and two in five households with a mother and a child under the age of twelve are facing food insecurity<sup>xv</sup>. Child hunger is a tragedy that can have many long-term negative consequences. Children who experience food insecurity are more likely to have adverse health impacts<sup>xvi</sup> and poorer life outcomes. In a study by the non-profit, No Kid Hungry, 80% of surveyed teachers responded that hunger affects a student's ability to concentrate and 76% said that hunger results in poor academic performance<sup>xvii</sup>. Children who do not have enough to eat are also likely to have lasting psychological impacts<sup>xviii</sup>.



## K-12 Students Who Receive Free or Reduced School Lunch, Percentage and Number



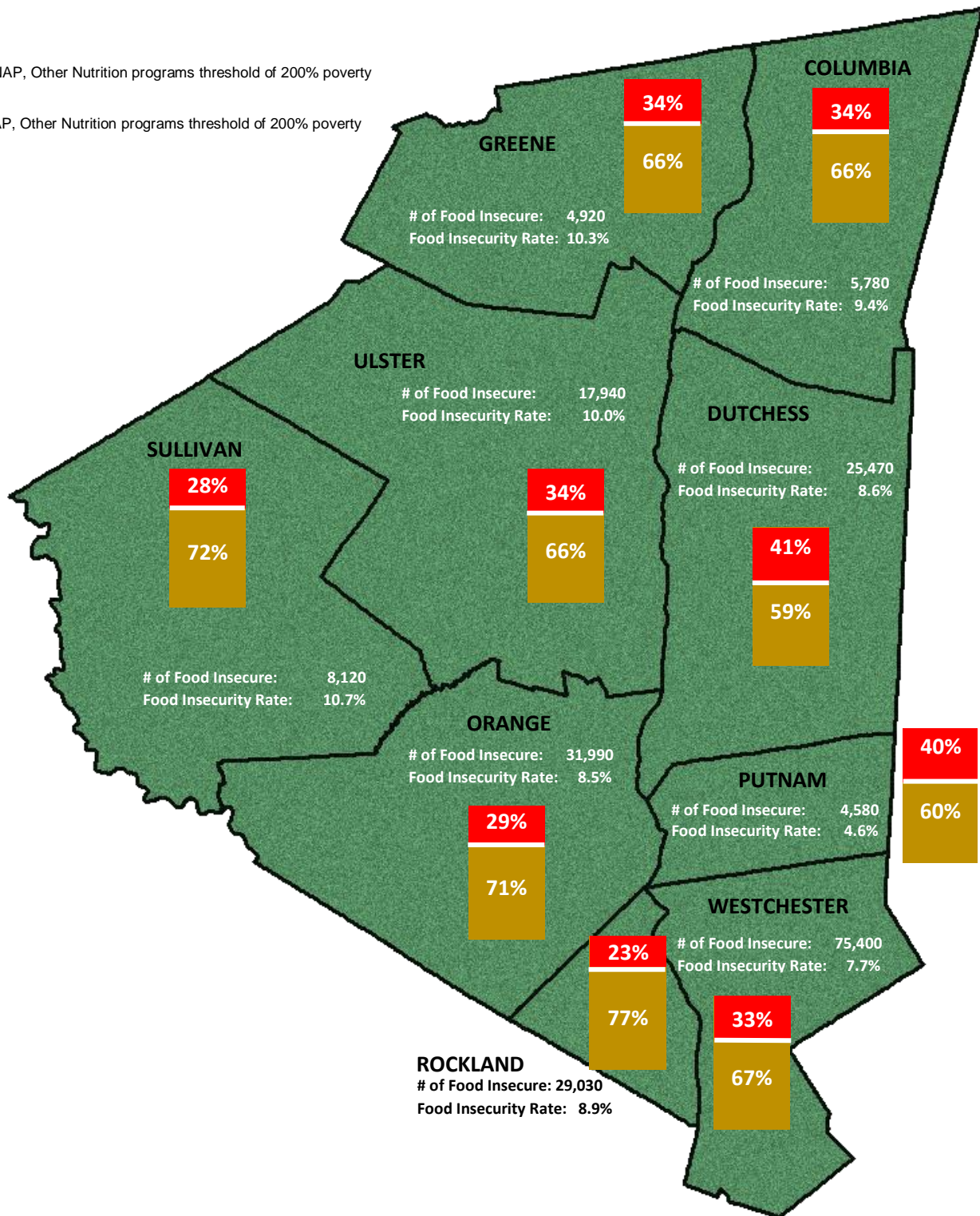
Source: 2020 New York State Kid's Well-being Indicators Clearinghouse

Feed America, a national network of food banks, calculates food insecurity based on a combination of local factors including unemployment rates, poverty levels, demographic and household characteristics, and the local cost of a meal. According to Feed America calculations, a large percentage of households that face food insecurity are ineligible for SNAP benefits. These are the households that 'fall through the cracks'. They may make just a little too much money to qualify for assistance, but are still challenged to make ends meet and put food on the table. The following chart shows the percentage of food insecure households that do not meet the SNAP requirements in the Hudson Valley. In every county, more than 20% of food insecure households must manage this struggle without SNAP. These households often rely on foodbanks to meet their food needs.

According to Stermer, the government could ramp up programs like SNAP especially at moments like the current crisis. The government has the financial resources to address the issue of food insecurity much more effectively than food banks, which, Stermer says, are really only there to fill the gaps.

## Food Insecurity and SNAP Eligibility by County, 2017

- Ineligible for SNAP, Other Nutrition programs threshold of 200% poverty
- Eligible for SNAP, Other Nutrition programs threshold of 200% poverty



Source: 2017 [feedamerica.org](http://feedamerica.org) and Pattern for Progress

## COVID-19 Exacerbates Food Insecurity in the Hudson Valley

Here in the Hudson Valley, food pantries, local government, non-profits and community groups face inundation by the sudden and alarming need for food assistance. The pandemic has pushed people who have been living close to the edge for a while over the line; a few weeks ago, buying groceries may have been challenging due to tight household budgets, but now with job loss, it is extremely difficult. With the closure of schools due to the pandemic there was yet another pressing concern, how to feed the children of the Hudson Valley region. The number of individuals and families who now find themselves unable to afford or access food is unprecedented, and our emergency food system is severely strained to meet the need.

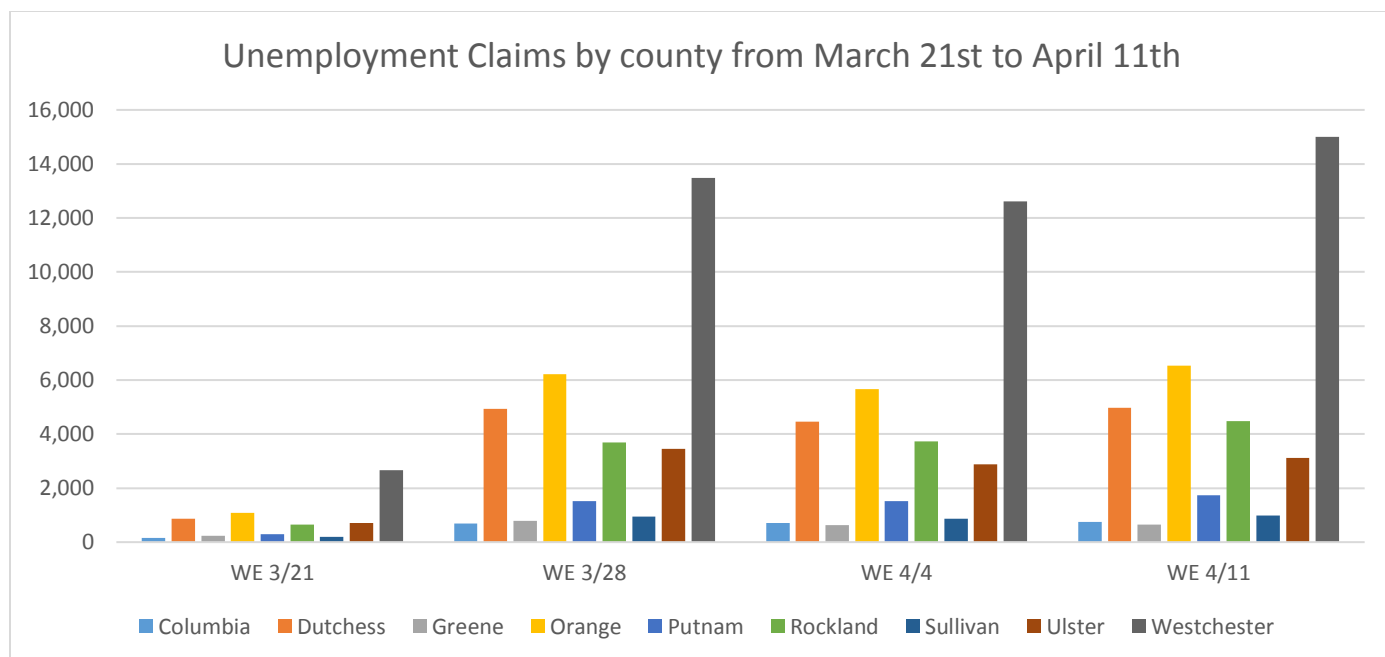
The Hudson Valley Food Bank has seen the need for its services grow by about 40% in recent weeks (in some areas the need has grown by close to by over 400%<sup>xix</sup>). The Food Bank of the Hudson Valley collects donations, relies on USDA support, and makes some small purchases to distribute food to around 400 member organizations that then directly give to people in need. Currently many of the member organizations, mostly food pantries and other emergency food suppliers, are struggling to stay open. The operations of these local organizations is dependent on volunteers, and in recent weeks many people no longer feel safe going out to volunteer. As a result, some pantries and emergency food distributors have temporarily shut their doors.

There is a challenge for organizations here in the Hudson Valley as well as across the country to meet the growing food need due to a drop in food donations. Normally, restaurants, hotels and food retail stores play a dual role in the food network. They are both an important purchaser of locally sourced produce, meat and dairy but are also a significant source for donated food. Currently, retail food stores are unable to keep up with the purchasing need and do not have the capacity to make donations, and many restaurants and hotels are currently closed or unable to donate.

Another sign that food insecurity is a growing issue is the rise in people applying for SNAP. In Orange County, for example, from March 20<sup>th</sup> to April 17<sup>th</sup> the County received 1,840 new applications. The average number of applications for the same time period is 800.

Unemployment claims have also increased significantly. In all of the Hudson Valley counties, in recent weeks, the percentage of the working population that made claims grew by between 200% and 400%. This tremendous jump is a warning that the number of individuals and families already or soon to be under financial stress is growing. For many, this means they too will have to turn to social safety nets in order to meet their food needs.





## The Response to Growing Need for Food Assistance

Almost immediately following the announcement of school and business closures, individuals, private organizations, and local governments across the region stepped up to address the issue food insecurity.

### Government Response

Federal, state, county and municipal governments have redirected resources including staff and budget to meet the growing issue of food insecurity in the Hudson Valley region. The following is a summary of some of the efforts made by government to respond to food needs during the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### Federal Government

The April 17 CARES act created a new USDA Coronavirus Food Assistance Program<sup>xx</sup>. Under this program, \$9.5 billion will go to the Secretary of Agriculture and \$14 billion will go directly to farmers and ranchers who have experienced losses due to supply chain disruptions and price declines of at least 5% between January and April.

Additionally, \$3 billion will go to purchase and distribute food to areas that have been significantly impacted by a loss in the wholesale market. Each month USDA will direct \$300 million, divided evenly, on fresh fruits and vegetables, dairy products, and meat products. Distributors and wholesalers will assemble and distribute boxes of food items to food banks, community and faith organizations, and other non-profits assisting Americans facing food insecurity.

### *New York State*

In his daily COVID-19 update on April 27<sup>th</sup>, Governor Andrew Cuomo announced that New York State would respond to the growing food crisis with \$25 million from the State's Special Public Health Emergency Fund for food banks and providers most impacted by COVID-19. He also announced the launching of the Nourish New York Initiative to connect food producers who have lost their wholesale market with those in need. In order to stop the dumping of milk, the state will partner with dairy producers to process excess milk into products like yogurt, cheese, sour cream, and cream cheese that will be distributed to food banks and those in need. In Governor Cuomo's plan to re-open New York, NY Forward, he emphasized the importance of agriculture by including it in Phase 1.

#### **NOURISH NY INITIATIVE**



**Nearly 50**  
food banks, soup kitchens  
and food pantries will  
receive support



**Over 2,100** farms are  
participating in the Nourish  
NY Initiative



**Over 20,000** households  
across NYS will receive  
Nourish NY products  
within the next week

### *Hudson Valley Counties and Municipalities*

In Dutchess County, Dutchess Responds was formed on March 24<sup>th</sup> in partnership with Dutchess Outreach and the Community Action Partnership for Dutchess County. The County Planning and Development staff is operating a hotline to assist with matching people in need with food pantries. There is also a Dutchess Responds website with a form to enter requests and additional resources. Contributions to the fund have been dispersed to various food distribution centers and food banks throughout the County. There is now a rolling application process to access grants from the fund for community-based non-profits for up to \$10,000. Visit the Dutchess Responds for more information: <https://www.dutchessny.gov/Departments/DBCH/Dutchess-Responds-COVID-19.htm>

Orange County is responding to the increased need for food assistance in several ways. There is a 24-hour Crisis Help Line that assists callers with accessing food pantries and volunteers to help with food access. The County Office for Aging (OFA) is collaborating with the County Veteran's Office and several non-profits to deliver meals to seniors, veterans and other vulnerable populations. Food pantries have seen a rise in the level of need and some are hosting food drives and ordering in bulk through the Food Bank of the Hudson Valley. The Department of Social Services is working with the Food Bank of the Hudson Valley to ensure food inventory is stable. The Emergency Services Office also has contact with State operations who are monitoring food supply status of food pantries. The Community Foundation and the United Way of Dutchess-Orange Region among other organizations are collecting financial donations in order to offer grants to other organizations for food.

Orange County local government including the Office of the County Executive, Emergency Services, Departments Health, Aging, and Veterans and the Department of Social Services along with non-profits all communicate regularly on issue of food insecurity. The County Website lists updates information on SNAP, the County school breakfast and lunch distribution program, and opportunities for the public to volunteer and/or donate food at the following link: <https://www.orangecountygov.com/1936/Coronavirus>

In response to the crisis, Ulster County started Project Resilience, a community fund and food distribution program. Partnering with United Way and Community Foundations of the Hudson Valley the fund has secured \$2 million in initial seed money and raised another \$200,000 in donations. The fund is also supporting local businesses by purchasing meals from local restaurants for delivery. As of the end of April 2020, an estimated 7,000 children and adults were signed up for meals through the program, about 4% of the County population. It is expected that the need will continue to rise and evolve. In the first week of May, Ulster County transitioned from reimbursements for prepared meals to reimbursements for groceries.



*Ulster County Action Committee Inc., Kingston Emergency Food Collaborative*

The City of Kingston has teamed up several local non-profits to meet the sudden need for additional food assistance and formed the Kingston Emergency Food Collaborative. Family of Woodstock, which has run food pantries since 1975, along with the Kingston food pantry People's Place and volunteers from the YMCA and RiseUp Kingston started a program to provide 600 dinner meals each day and groceries to a couple of hundred families a month. Meals are prepared at a relatively new professional kitchen at the Everette Hodge Community Center. The Food Collaborative as well as Ulster County benefit from an existing program, The Farm to Food Pantry Collaborative, which links local farms with food pantries. Last year through the program 130,000 lbs. of food from 36 different local farms was donated to 52 different programs. The program also includes a network of five "food hubs" which include refrigerator storage facilities throughout the County.

Putnam County, like all in the Hudson Valley region, has seen a rise in the number of people seeking food assistance. With a reduced amount of donations, Putnam food pantries face the challenge of maintaining the same level of service and inventory of food as they did prior to the COVID-19 crisis. The United Way of Westchester/Putnam is one of several organizations that has provided food to households through food giveaways. Putnam Community Action Partnership (CAP) and Second Chance Foods are collaborating with Brewster Central Schools and the Carmel Central Schools on lunch program for students. However, distribution is challenging with the closure of public transportation and schools, matching children with meals is difficult. Putnam CAP is committed to providing food access and other services to those who need it most.

In collaboration with United Way, Rockland County has established the Rockland County Coronavirus Crisis Fund to provide resources to families impacted by the COVID-19 including food and other necessary items. The Social Services and the Office of the Aging are the primary responders to the issue of food insecurity in Rockland County.





*Catskills Food Hub, Donation Food Boxes*

Sullivan County has established a weekday Emergency Community Assistance hotline at 845-807-0925 to connect residents to resources within the County. The Sullivan County government is collaborating with Cornell Cooperative Extension (CCE) Sullivan County, Sullivan Allies Leading Together (SALT), and area schools to meet the emergency food needs throughout the County<sup>xxi</sup> and delivers over 2,000 meals each week. Funding support has come from the Community Foundation of Orange and Sullivan Counties, Lions Clubs, Assemblywoman Aileen Gunther, the Skoda family, Brey's Eggs, and others.

Columbia County started the program Family Assistance Network (FAN) for COVID-19 related needs.

Westchester County is coordinating food services with a number of organizations and companies throughout the County. The County is helping quarantined families and individuals who are awaiting test results, those hospitalized with COVID-19 and then released to a recovery facility, and those who cannot go out due to underlying medical issues or because of their age. The County is connecting volunteers and those who wish to donate to the need. The County has also established distribution sites for the food bank Feeding Westchester as well as food pantry grab and go food distribution sites. The County gets referrals from community advocates and Faith leaders of various denominations for families in need. The County connects those who are eligible for programs such as SNAP.

The Westchester Department of Senior Services and Programs is also working with 17 nutrition programs in the County to serve meals to homebound participants, delivering 5,200 meals to 1,700 frail and vulnerable seniors each week, and collaborating with Feeding Westchester to provide a grocery delivery program that serves 4,300 seniors throughout the County.

The City of New Rochelle started its own program in order to sustain vulnerable residents and support local restaurants: NourishALL (sounds like New Rochelle when you say it aloud). With \$400,000 in donations from developers, 1,000 people receive weekly gift cards of \$50 to local restaurants. The program at once supplements food insecurity efforts and provides much-needed income to local eateries.

In Peekskill, the Seniors and Nutrition Program, which normally runs a social club for seniors with a lunch program, has expanded to also manage deliveries from Feeding Westchester. The percentage of seniors in need of assistance through the programs has risen by about 30%. Some seniors are home after being discharged from hospitals and rehabilitation centers due to the pandemic while others need assistance because their caregivers are no longer working at this time.

## *Non-Profit and Community Organized Response*

Many non-profits expanded their services in response to the needs of the crisis. Regional Economic Community Action Program (RECAP) in the City of Newburgh helps an at risk population become more economically self-sufficient through a variety of programs including employment support and training, nutrition and advocacy, translations, and emergency assistance. As businesses have shut their doors and employers laid-off employees across the county, RECAP's "Helping Our Neighbors" program in partnership with the organization LYNC have had to quickly adjust their programming and extend their reach to hundreds of new families in need of food assistance. Together the organizations are currently helping to feed around 1,000 families a week and have a waiting list of another 500 families. Families looking for food assistance call a number, leave their name, address and family size. Volunteers assemble food boxes for each family that are available for delivery or pickup. The program relies on generous donations from the Food Bank of the Hudson Valley and other food card donations used to purchase groceries. The volunteers are from the community and themselves often recipients of the food assistance.

People's Place in Kingston is part of the Kingston Emergency Food Collaborative and serves people in need throughout Ulster County. Since March 15<sup>th</sup> the non-profit has provided over ¼ million meals (as groceries) to County residents. They also quickly started the program, Bag Student Hunger, when school districts closed in order to provide breakfast, lunches, and snack foods to families with school age children. As of May 7, they have provided over 110,000 meals. The Food Bank of North Eastern New York has delivered over 209,000 pounds of food in seven weeks to People's Place for distribution, a measure of the large quantity of food the pantry is helping to provide. People's Place is planning to continue both the delivery of groceries and the Bag Student Hunger program for as long as school are closed.

People to People, a food pantry in Rockland County, normally provides monthly food packages to around 350 families. Diane Serratore, the Chief Executive Officer, stated that during the month of April, People to People provided food assistance to 400 new families.

There are countless other examples of neighbors helping one another, generous donations, and volunteers working hard for their community. In Poughkeepsie, a small community non-profit "Community Matters 2" (CM2) has raised donations on social media in order to provide breakfast bags for kids at a pickup spot near downtown. CM2 feeds approximately 100 school age students each morning and also does a hot meal dinner program in collaboration with Change Point Church, Takoda Service Dogs, and Hope On Mission for about 200-250 people each evening. The Community Foundation of Orange and Sullivan established a response fund for non-profit organizations that assist the neediest families with food among other things. Another example of the community rallying to aid their neighbors is, Mutual Aid Beacon, which formed as a network, to match volunteers to the needs of the community.



*Catskills Food Hub Donation Box*



*Community Matters 2, Food Donations*

## *Sustained Economic Impact and Response*

While the efforts to address the growing need for food assistance have been strong, and in some cases heroic, there is a real question of sustainability. The economy is predicted to be slow to recover and while many will go back to work in the next few months and life will begin to resume a normal pattern, not all will have a job to go back to right away. The increased need for food assistance will likely persist and this does not include all the families that struggled to feed themselves before the pandemic. Additionally, disruptions to the food supply chain are likely to persist and cause reduced food availability. Community leaders, non-profits serving at risk populations, and generous volunteers should think about how their assistance can be sustained over the long term.



*RECAP Facebook Post*

According to Jonathan Zamora, the Nutrition Site Manager for the Peekskill Seniors and Nutrition Program, the pandemic has provided an opportunity for various organizations to work together on securing food for those in need, and he hopes these relationships are lasting. Zamora also thinks there is an increased level of awareness of food insecurity in our communities. He said the City of Peekskill has done a remarkable job coordinating the efforts of different entities including the school district, food pantries, and others as well as communicating to the public about the availability of service. One of the greatest challenges at the moment is the transportation of food to communities in need. According to Zamora in the weeks going forward this will continue to be an issue.

Michele McKeon from RECAP said she thinks the food assistance program in Newburgh may be sustainable though heavily reliant on donations and volunteer support, but that there is a need for a more formalized government response to issues of food insecurity, especially during times of disaster.

Christine Hein, the Executive Director of People's Place, the largest food pantry in Ulster County, asserts that food related challenges were here before COVID-19 and will not go away in the foreseeable future. Still, this is an unprecedented moment and the food pantry has seen an increase need for meal assistance of over 430% since the beginning of the pandemic. Hein is concerned about the demand placed on the volunteers and staff at organizations who provide food relief. These people are critical to the food emergency system but may experience burnout as the pandemic continues to cause economic hardship. Hein states,

"... every reasonable assessment of the economic impact of this crisis indicates that there will be significant additional need for our services to help those most vulnerable among us for years to come after COVID. As always, the poorest among us are traditionally the first to suffer the negative economic consequences and the last to share in economic growth. It is important to highlight that this is a long-term issue. The medical dangers are immediate and may ultimately be solved but the economic challenges in the aftermath for the City of Kingston residents we serve will be long lasting. We realize this is a long-term mission and we are preparing to offer augmented services through the end of 2020 and into 2021."

Many people interviewed for this report agree that food insecurity is likely to be a growing issue in the coming months. In order to meet the need our leaders will need to prioritize the issue, develop creative solutions, and offer support to operatives within the food system including farmers, transporters, processors, distributors, food banks and pantries, among others.



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