Distribution of Fresh Foods in Food Pantries: Challenges and Opportunities in Illinois During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Background: The charitable food system distributes free food to clients across the U.S. Still, many nutrition and health-focused efforts need help to succeed, which was exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Objective: To understand barriers and facilitators across the spectrum of the Social-Ecological Model to distributing nutritious, fresh foods in food pantries across Illinois during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Study Design, Settings, Participants: Forty-nine representatives of Illinois food pantries were recruited to participate. All focus groups were held via an online platform in October 2021.

Measurable Outcome/Analysis: A script was developed to facilitate a discussion about the challenges and opportunities faced in distributing fresh foods in pantries. The script included a definition of what fresh foods were (and were not), followed by 11 open-ended questions about representatives’ experiences and perceptions with follow-up prompts and probing questions. After review from external colleagues, the script was updated to improve flow and clarity. After data collection, a codebook was created based on relevant literature, common themes heard in recordings, and stakeholder interests. Transcripts of each group were coded and analyzed using a basic interpretive approach.

Results: The analysis of focus group transcripts resulted in challenges and opportunities, which were organized into five distinct levels of influence, mirroring aspects of the Social-Ecological Model to include 1) societal, 2) community, 3) organizational, 4) interpersonal, and 5) product. Many pantry representatives felt they offered a wide variety of fresh foods that met the client’s health needs. However, distribution of fresh foods was impacted by community partners, food bank policies and practices, and the quality of the donated fresh foods. Furthermore, the physical limitations of pantries limited fresh food storage capacity. The COVID-19 pandemic posed unique stressors that highlighted additional opportunities for the charitable food system.

Conclusion: Future studies should evaluate the effects of the suggested initiatives and changes at the food pantry, food bank, and policy levels.

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Identification of Overlap of Broadband Connection and Pickup Locations for Online SNAP-Authorized Retailers Within Virginia

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Background: Online grocery purchasing is an important food acquisition strategy and may provide expanded access to fresh produce for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) participants, however, broadband connection is needed for access to online purchasing platforms. SNAP launched online purchasing through select retailers in 2019 and has since expanded authorizations. Virginia currently has 17 authorized retailer systems for online SNAP purchases. Exploring the overlap of broadband connection and pickup locations for online SNAP produce purchases is necessary to understand the availability of online produce purchasing for SNAP participants so that future research and policies can advance digital and nutrition equity.

Objective: To determine overlap of broadband connection and pickup sites for fresh produce ordered online with SNAP benefits within Virginia to identify potentially underserved areas.

Study Design, Settings, Participants: Broadband connection is measured by percentage of addresses served by connections with at least 100 megabits per second (mbps) download and 20 mbps upload speeds within a census block, current to December 2021. Pickup locations were determined by a dataset of SNAP-authorized retailers and searches of retailer websites.

Measurable Outcome/Analysis: The spatial representation provided an initial identification of locations within Virginia where broadband coverage and pickup locations do not overlap and can be a tool to determine geographic areas that should be prioritized for future research and infrastructure development.

Results: Of 749 retail locations, 605 locations offer pickup for online fresh produce purchases. As of January 2023, 144 locations accept online SNAP purchases but do not offer pickup. Pickup locations for produce purchased online with SNAP were concentrated in Virginia’s metro areas. Rural areas had fewer pickup locations and overall lower rates of broadband connection.

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