

LFI 2021 – Team Research Report

Public Health Group

Thesis:

Fairfax County has a well-established network of non-profits, government programs, faith-based organizations, and other partners who have and continue to address food insecurity in innovative ways. Significant efforts have been made to address food insecurity through an equity lens, as well-established research reveals that black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) populations are disproportionately affected. Further, as food insecurity in Fairfax has been exacerbated by the coronavirus, these organizations have both strengthened their collaborative efforts and pivoted their own approaches to meet the increased need.

County Districts:

Hunter Mill District & Sully District

Presentation Date:

April 22, 2021, via ZOOM

Team 3 Members:

- Amanda Kastl
- Dawn Audia
- Enrique “Rick” Obando
- Gregory “Greg” Fried
- Jennifer Hilwine
- Julie Isaacs
- Kathryn “Kathy” Taylor
- Leslie Kane
- Shannon Kelly
- Cheri Danaher (Sponsor)
- Cynthia Bailey (Sponsor)

Interviews:

- Dawn Hyman, One Fairfax, interview by Dawn Audia, Shannon Kelly, and Kathy Taylor, January 28, 2021, notes
- Diane Charles, Program Manager, Fairfax County Food Council and Christina Garris, Program Manager, Britepaths, interview by Leadership Fairfax Team 3, February 2, 2021, notes
- Bill Threlkeld, Cornerstones, interview by Jennifer Hiltwine and Leslie Kane, February 10, 2021, notes
- Kathy Ryan, Fairfax County Public Schools, interview by Greg Fried and Amanda Kastl, February 22, 2021, notes
- Walter Alcorn, Hunter Mill District Supervisor, and Gwendolyn Minton, Hunter Mill District Office, interview by Greg Fried and Amanda Kastl, February 23, 2021, notes
- Michael Coyle, Chief of Staff, Sully District Office, interview by Greg Fried and Amanda Kastle, February 23, 2021, notes
- Harmonie Taddeo and Pamela Montesinos, Western Fairfax Christian Ministries, interview by Shannon Kelly, February 25, 2021, notes

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- Sue Hamblen, Vienna Presbyterian Missions, interview by Jennifer Hiltwine, Rick Obando, and Shannon Kelly, February 25, 2021, notes
- Terri Siggins and Matt Mulder, Arcadia Center for Sustainable Food and Agriculture, interview with Julie Isaacs, Shannon Kelly, and Rick Obando, March 4, 2021, notes
- Annie Turner, Food for Others, site visit by Jennifer Hiltwine, Amanda Kastl, and Shannon Kelly, March 5, 2021, notes
- Caroline Rankin, Fairfax County Neighborhood and Community Services Community Impact Analyst, interview by Jennifer Hiltwine and Shannon Kelly, March 12, 2021, notes
- Adam LaRose, Capital Area Food Bank, interview by Jennifer Hiltwine and Shannon Kelly, March 15, 2021, notes
- Ramona Carroll, Fairfax County Neighborhood and Community Services Interfaith Coordinator, interview by Greg Fried, Jennifer Hiltwine, and Shannon Kelly, March 22, 2021, notes

Documents or Supporting Information by Topic

Topic 1: Food Insecurity Through an Equity Lens

- Fairfax County Food Council, Beads of Privilege Exercise: Materials and Instructions
- Love, Bayard and Hayes-Greene, Deena. *The Groundwater Approach: Building a Practical Understanding of Structural Racism*. The Racial Equity Institute:
<https://www.dropbox.com/home/Team%203/Research/Food%20Security%20Through%20an%20Equity%20Lens?preview=REI%2BGroundwater%2BApproach%2BUpdated%2BPrinter%2BFriendly.pdf>
- Consumer Health Foundation. *Immigration Status as a Social Determinant of Health*:
https://www.dropbox.com/home/Team%203/Research/Food%20Security%20Through%20an%20Equity%20Lens?preview=SDOH_BriefingPaper_FoodInsecurity.pdf
- Usher, Kareem. *Valuing all Knowledges through an Expanded Definition of Access*. Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development, June 15 2015:
<https://www.dropbox.com/home/Team%203/Research/Food%20Security%20Through%20an%20Equity%20Lens?preview=Valuing+All+Knowledges+Through+An+Expanded+Definition+Of+Access.pdf>
- Powers, Jessica and Snow, Theresa with Babb, Suzanne. *Beyond Bread: Healthy Food Sourcing in Emergency Food Programs*. WhyHunger:
https://www.dropbox.com/home/Team%203/Research/Food%20Security%20Through%20an%20Equity%20Lens?preview=0596-WH-Book_BEYOND-BREAD_Single.pdf
- WhyHunger: *A Path Forward: Innovations at the Intersection of Hunger and Health*:
<https://www.dropbox.com/home/Team%203/Research/Food%20Security%20Through%20an%20Equity%20Lens?preview=A-Path-Forward-Hunger-Health-Guide-WhyHunger-1.pdf>
- Urban Institute. *Disrupting Food Insecurity: Steps Communities Can Take*:
https://www.dropbox.com/home/Team%203/Research/Food%20Security%20Through%20an%20Equity%20Lens?preview=Disrupting+Food+Insecurity_Urban+Institute.pdf

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- WhyHunger. *Rise Up! Organizing in Emergency Food Programs*:
https://www.dropbox.com/home/Team%203/Research/Food%20Security%20Through%20an%20Equity%20Lens?preview=Nourishing-Guide_EMAIL.pdf

Topic 2: Understanding Food Insecurity; Food Insecurity in Fairfax County

- Capital Area Food Bank, *Hunger Report 2020*
- Capital Area Food Bank, *Hunger Heat Map*:
<https://cafb.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=b03762cd195640eda50a0ccea5b3ea47f>
- Capital Area Food Bank, Annual Report 2020
- Feeding America, *The Healthcare Costs of Food Insecurity*, July 2019:
https://www.feedingamerica.org/sites/default/files/2019-07/The%20Healthcare%20Costs%20of%20Food%20Insecurity%20Brief_July%202019.pdf
- Feeding America, Interactive Resources webpage:
<https://www.feedingamerica.org/research/interactive-data>
- Feeding America. *Map the Meal Gap 2020 Report, 2020*:
<https://www.feedingamerica.org/sites/default/files/2020-06/Map%20the%20Meal%20Gap%202020%20Combined%20Modules.pdf>
- Fairfax County Food Council Meeting, January 6, 2021, notes
- Fairfax County Food Access and Literacy Workgroup, February 3, 2021, notes
- Fairfax County Public Schools, Free and Reduced Lunch Distribution public document, Excel Spreadsheet, provided by Kathy Ryan, FCPS
- Fairfax County Public Schools Food Resources Webpage: <https://www.fcps.edu/return-school/food>
- Fairfax County Public Schools Food Resources Bus Routes Webpage:
<https://www.fcps.edu/return-school/food/bus>
- Fairfax County Public Schools Sully District Magisterial Map:
<https://www.fcps.edu/sites/default/files/media/pdf/Sully%20Magisterial%20District%20Map.pdf>
- Fairfax County Public Schools Hunter Mill District Magisterial Map:
<https://www.fcps.edu/sites/default/files/media/pdf/Hunter%20Mill%20Magisterial%20Map.pdf>
- Fairfax County Government Food Resources Map: <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/maps/food-resources>
- Fairfax County Government Food Resources Map (Spanish): <https://fairfax-county-covid-19-geospatial-resources-fairfaxcountygis.hub.arcgis.com/app/3f12bd50f83e49be9e0858670187294e>
- Fairfax County Government Basic Needs Density Map, 2018:
<https://www.dropbox.com/home/Team%203/Research/Defining%20Food%20Insecurity%20-%20Fairfax%20County?preview=Fairfax+County+2018+Basic+Needs+Density+Map.pdf>
- Fairfax County Government Coordinated Services Planning, Density of Basic Needs Requests, 2019:
<https://www.dropbox.com/home/Team%203/Research/Defining%20Food%20Insecurity%20-%20Fairfax%20County?preview=Fairfax+County+2018+Basic+Needs+Density+Map.pdf>

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- Fairfax County Government Coordinated Services Planning, Density of Basic Needs Requests for Human Services Region 4, 2019:
<https://www.dropbox.com/home/Team%203/Research/Defining%20Food%20Insecurity%20-%20Fairfax%20County?preview=Fairfax+County+2019+basic+needs+requests+Map+-+region+4.pdf>
- Lauter, Emily. Fors/Marsh Group: *Program Evaluation Results, Coalition for Equitable Food Access and Economic Relief*:
<https://www.dropbox.com/home/Team%203/Research/Defining%20Food%20Insecurity%20-%20Fairfax%20County?preview=Fairfax+Food+Access+Program+Evaluation.pdf>

Topic 3: Food Insecurity Before, During and After COVID-19

- Fairfax County Coordinated Services Planning: FY 2021 Contact Topics of Calls by Quarter:
https://www.dropbox.com/home/Team%203/Research/Pandemic%20changes?preview=FY201+CSP+Contacts_Topic+of+Calls_Trends.pdf
- Tatian, Peter. *Who is Most Affected by the Economic Downturn in the DC Region?* Urban Institute, May 4 2020:
<https://www.dropbox.com/home/Team%203/Research/Pandemic%20changes?preview=Who+Is+Most+Affected+by+the+Economic+Downturn+in+the+DC+Region + +Greater+DC.pdf>
- Capital Area Food Bank, Fairfax County Virginia 2021 Policy Agenda:
https://www.dropbox.com/home/Team%203/Research?preview=CAFB_Fairfax_County_Exec_Summary.pdf
- Capital Area Food Bank. *A Playbook for Localities: Inclusion of Food Security Metrics into Strategic Planning*:
https://www.dropbox.com/home/Team%203/Research?preview=CAFB_Food-Security-Playbook_Localities_FINAL.pdf
- Fairfax County Youth Survey:
<https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/health-humanservices/fairfax-county-youth-survey>
- U.S. Census Bureau Household Pulse Survey:
<https://www.census.gov/data/experimental-data-products/household-pulse-survey.html>

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Executive Summary

Although Fairfax County boasts one of the highest median incomes in the nation, the associated high cost of living means that a significant number of residents experience food insecurity every year. In recent years, Fairfax County government and the community of stakeholders that work to ensure food security for all County residents have made significant strides in shoring up the food safety net for families in need. The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 has exacerbated food insecurity in Fairfax County, resulting in a corresponding increase in food assistance services and necessitating a shift in how stakeholders in the community coordinate and collaborate to provide assistance. Stakeholders agree that the increased need for food assistance that emerged during the pandemic is likely to continue for several years, as families recover from economic hardship. In the future, ongoing coordination by stakeholders holds the greatest potential to increase the effectiveness of food assistance, with a focus on the five aspects of food security as the guiding principles to ensure that services fully meet the community's physical, social, cultural, and dietary needs.

Food insecurity is defined as “having inconsistent access to adequate food because of limited financial and other resources; a lack of access to enough food for all household members to have an active and healthy life; and limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate foods” (Hyman, 2021). Many causes of food insecurity are rooted in systemic, structural, and institutional racism, including documented inequities in access to economic opportunities, education, safe and affordable housing, and equitable health care. As a result, food insecurity disproportionately affects communities of color, in addition to low-income and other marginalized populations. Considerations of equity, therefore, are essential to understanding and addressing the issue of food insecurity in Fairfax County. Through the establishment of One Fairfax, equity policy has become a fundamental component of food program initiatives.

In 2018, the food security rate in Fairfax County was approximately five percent, equating to just over 67,000 individuals. (Turner, 2021). The corresponding food security network in Fairfax County consisted of a large but loosely organized constellation of public, non-profit, and faith-based providers that served populations of need based on general geographic area. While several large food banks distributed food to smaller, community organizations, many services tended to operate in silos. In 2015, the Fairfax Food Council was established by the Partnership for a Healthier Fairfax to promote the vision of “a vibrant food system where healthy, accessible and affordable food is valued as a basic human right” (Turner, 2021). Additionally, in 2019, Fairfax County's Food Access Council organized the County's first Food Summit to examine the issue of food security with a special focus on equity.

However, as a result of COVID-19, food insecurity in Fairfax County has nearly doubled; by the end of 2020, the food insecurity rate was estimated to be over eight percent (Turner, 2021). In April 2020, as the pandemic was just beginning to emerge, Fairfax County's Neighborhood and Community Services (NCS) team convened a group of emergency food providers to form the Food Access Working Group, whose objective was to collaborate and share best practices to address the growing need for food assistance across the County. This group continues to meet regularly, along with the Fairfax Food Council.

Fairfax County is fortunate to have a large network of public and private providers, many of which rapidly scaled up operations to provide additional food services in the wake of the pandemic. These stakeholders range in size from large regional food pantries to the public school system to large community assistance

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organizations to small faith-based providers. The pandemic created both the need and the opportunity for greater coordination among all of these organizations to ensure that community needs across the County were being identified and addressed. In every interview conducted by Team 3, regardless of where an organization was situated in the food assistance network, providers stressed the importance of continuing to work collaboratively to ensure that all residents have equitable access to acceptable, accessible, and affordable healthy food. As Fairfax County emerges from the pandemic, an opportunity exists to reimagine the food distribution system to create healthier and more sustainable access to food for all residents regardless of their socioeconomic status.

Description of the Approach

At the beginning of the project, Team 3 identified a list of key inquiry questions that were important to understand the issue of food security in Fairfax County. These questions included:

- What is food insecurity?
- Who is most impacted by food insecurity?
- How is the food system tied to other public systems such as housing, education, transportation, or other programs?
- What does food insecurity look like in Fairfax County? Where is the need greatest?
- Who provides food assistance in Fairfax County? What does the support network look like?
- Where do gaps in food assistance exist in Fairfax County?
- How has the pandemic impacted food insecurity in Fairfax County for residents and assistance providers?
- How does the food system need to change to fully address food insecurity in Fairfax?

The team decided to cast a wide net for information in order to better identify key themes for the Program Day. Members from the team started with the recommended initial contacts and were able to identify several more as a result of these initial interviews. In total, Team 3 conducted 14 interviews with public, non-profit, and faith-based community providers. The team also had the opportunity to make a site visit to one of the County's largest food distributors, Food for Others, to better understand the network of providers and how the food system in Fairfax County works. In addition to interviews, team members collected data from a variety of sources, including Fairfax County's NCS assistance request database, Fairfax County Public Schools, Feeding America, and the Capital Area Food Bank. Finally, Team 3 collected helpful background reading on the topic of equity and food insecurity from Dawn Hyman with One Fairfax.

Over the course of the research conducted, key themes emerged that eventually presented a clearer picture of the issues that would be covered during Team 3's Program Day, and it was determined that equity would be a guiding principle across all the Program Day sessions.

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Analysis of the Issues

Over the course of the research conducted, three key themes emerged:

1. Equity as a fundamental determining factor as to who has access to healthy food, including in Fairfax County;
2. The vast and varied community of food providers in Fairfax County and their ability to coordinate and collaborate effectively to address the rising need for food assistance; and
3. The impact of the pandemic on food assistance needs in Fairfax County and how its after-effects will likely shape food assistance needs well into the future.

Fairfax County's current food system does not serve everyone equitably, and the pandemic has further amplified these disparities in the system. In one of the wealthiest counties in the nation, over 30 percent of elementary students in Fairfax County Public Schools qualify for free or reduced-price meals, many of whom depend on school meals for the majority of their food intake (Ryan, 2021). The high cost of housing in Fairfax forces many families to choose between paying rent and utilities and purchasing high-quality fresh foods. Grocery stores, local markets, and even farmers markets are not evenly dispersed geographically, and are less accessible for many low-income communities, including in the Sully and Hunter Mill districts. In addition, unreliable public services such as bus or metro, or even a lack of public sidewalks and adequate street lighting, can hinder this access even further.

With regard to food assistance, Fairfax County has a wide range of providers, ranging from small faith-based organizations to large regional food banks. In fact, the County's Human Services Resource Guide lists 78 food assistance organizations (Turner, 2021). Further, research by Team 3 indicated that many smaller organizations that provided very limited food assistance prior to the pandemic rapidly scaled up their operations as community needs skyrocketed during COVID-19. These organizations, which often rely heavily on volunteer resources, have faced steep learning curves in order to meet demand. Research indicated that the County's role in convening working groups to share best practices and coordinate food assistance has been critical to these organizations' success.

While the County is making collective progress towards closing gaps in food access, coordination and collaboration by the stakeholder community is key to shoring up the safety net and distributing food resources where they are needed most. In addition, identifying patterns of inequity is an obvious and necessary first step to correcting inequities in the food system. It is apparent that a need exists to examine the root causes of where and how pockets of food insecurity and food deserts emerge. In doing so, findings from such studies can then effectively inform appropriate investments both in food access points and into other public systems, such as transportation, public safety, and housing, which are also connected to the broader inequities associated with food access.

Fairfax County is positioned with the depth of resources to ensure that no resident has to go without access to fresh and healthy food. Although the pandemic presented enormous challenges to the well-established food assistance network in Fairfax County, the stakeholder community quickly took action and recognized an opportunity to create a better, more efficient, and more effective food assistance system for the future. Experts agree that the increased need for food assistance will continue for the next several years, as families recover from the economic impact of the pandemic. For this reason, the ongoing support by the County for collaborative workgroups and service coordination will be critical to the success of the food assistance network in the foreseeable future.

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Directions for Future Research / Call to Action

Future research could explore the following inquiry questions:

- How can the food system in Fairfax be better coordinated?
- How can existing resources be better leveraged to reach all communities?
- Where and how do pockets of food insecurity and food deserts emerge in Fairfax County?
- What are the root causes of food insecurity in Fairfax County? What structural barriers exist that prevent access to fresh, healthy, culturally appropriate food for County residents?
- What would an equitable food system in Fairfax County look like?
- What would zero food insecurity in Fairfax County look like?

Conclusion

Access to fresh, healthy, acceptable food is essential to a productive and healthy life. Fairfax County residents who struggle to acquire high-quality food are at increased risk for health issues and are less able to be productive at work, in school, or within our communities. Because access to healthy food is central to the well-being of our residents, addressing and solving food insecurity should be a priority with respect to County policy and financial investment. As Fairfax County and the community of stakeholders continue to improve the coordination and delivery of food assistance services to County residents, considerations of equity must be central to any new policies or programs in order to eliminate systemic barriers and ensure that all residents have reliable access to high-quality, acceptable food.