



Food Security in Montgomery County, MD

Lessons Learned from Covid-19 Response Efforts

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Montgomery County Council Summer Fellow**

About the Fellow

Andrew Wen is a Master of Public Administration candidate at Cornell University, concentrating on Social Policy. He is passionate about poverty alleviation, including issues related to food insecurity, housing, and community development.

Prior to graduate school, Andrew worked as a grant writer at Philabundance, a Feeding America food bank in Philadelphia, and served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Indonesia. He graduated from Boston University with a B.A. in English and Economics.



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Executive Summary

The Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated food insecurity across the country. Feeding America, the national coalition of food banks, projected an increase in food insecurity within Montgomery County from 8% in 2018 to 13% in 2020. Those who were most impacted were already at risk before the pandemic, including children, seniors, minorities, and low-income communities.ⁱ

Thanks to increased government funding, Montgomery County created emergency programs that successfully expanded community access to food resources during the pandemic. Food distribution through nonprofit providers increased dramatically in the past year: in the six-month period between May to November 2020, food distribution nearly doubled according to data reported by County-funded food assistance providers. Moreover, with increased funding and dedicated personnel, the County was able to target populations traditionally underserved by existing food systems, such as Spanish-speaking communities or home-bound seniors.

This paper examines the “lessons learned” from the County’s emergency food-security initiatives in the past year, with a particular focus on the Food Access Call Center and the Service Consolidation Hubs. Through interviews with government and nonprofit stakeholders, and by analyzing data collected from the Call Center and the Hubs, this paper shows that the County leveraged Covid-related funding to improve the overall quality of services available to food-insecure households. The benefits created by these new initiatives addressed inequalities that existed before the pandemic and, if given continued investment, have the potential to strengthen the County’s food assistance system well into the future.

Methodology

This paper was researched through community meetings and interviews with members of the Food Security Task Force, the Food Council, the Department of Health and Human Services, and nonprofit service providers including the Manna Food Center.

Data analysis was conducted through Stata and ArcMap, using raw data collected by the Food Security Task Force from County-funded food assistance providers, the Food Access Call Center, and the Service Consolidation Hubs.

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Examples of County-Funded Emergency Food Initiatives

The Food Security Task Force

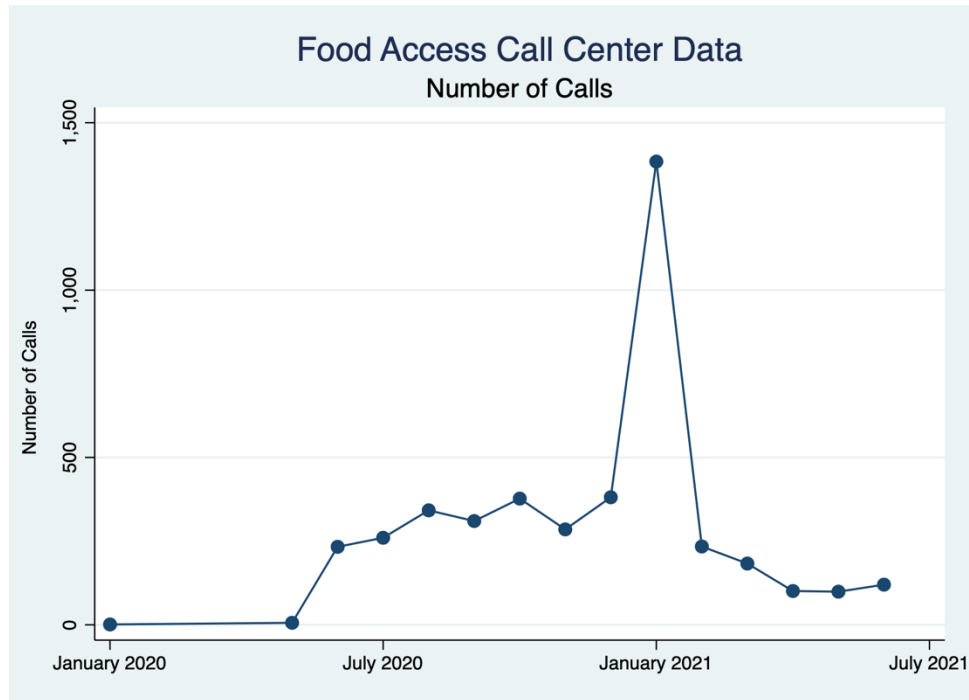
As the sharp increase in food insecurity caused by the Covid-19 pandemic became apparent, the County created the Food Security Task Force to coordinate emergency response efforts between government, nonprofit, and community stakeholders. The Task Force consisted of leadership from the Montgomery County Food Council, the Office of Emergency Management and Homeland Security, and the Department of Health and Human Services. Through this Task Force, the County Council channeled over \$9 million in additional emergency funding to community food assistance providers for food purchases, administrative support, personal protective equipment, and other necessities.

The Food Security Task Force provided nonprofit organizations with greater access to and support from government agencies, and local food assistance providers reported an increased sense of community and capacity due to this heightened level of governmental attention. Prior to the Task Force, the County only had one dedicated staff member for food security issues located within DHHS.

The Food Access Call Center

The Food Access Call Center was created in June 2020 to provide a dedicated food assistance phone service for residents, many of whom previously relied on 311 or the Food Council's website to find food resources. Unlike 311, the Food Access Call Center provided a case management model of service, helping refer residents not only to food resources but also other government and community services. Because many of the County's food insecure population preferred to speak Spanish, the Task Force made sure to include Spanish-speaking call-takers.

The Food Access Call Center still receives a high number of calls today. While demand has decreased significantly since a peak in January, calls in the past three months have remained steady at approximately 40% of the average number of calls in 2020.



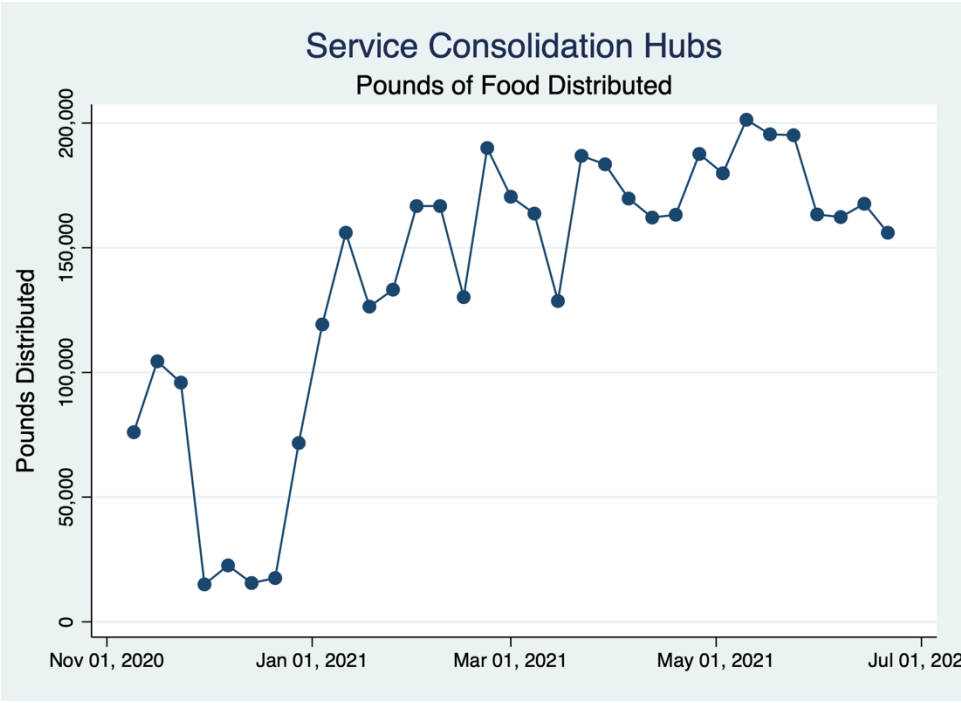
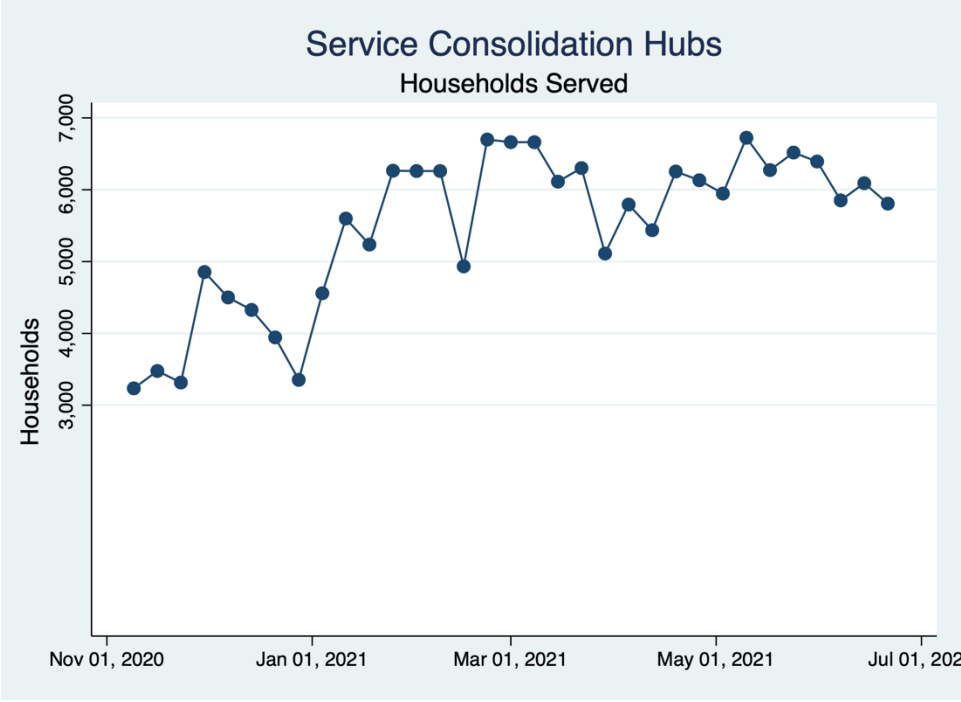
The high increase in call volume in January 2021 may be attributed to the launch of the County’s Food Resources website, which included the Food Access Call Center’s number, a calendar of food distribution events, and program information for SNAP and MCPS meals.

Service Consolidation Hubs

The eight Service Consolidation Hubs across the County, based on the model pioneered by the BlackRock Center Upcounty Hub, brought local community partners together to provide services at convenient locations. Service Consolidation Hubs responded effectively to the rise in food insecurity within the County by providing additional food and diapers, particularly during the peak in Covid-19 cases in January 2021. While distributions and services have decreased in recent weeks, they are comparable to levels at the beginning of 2021, indicating that the overall need within the County is still at an elevated level compared to a pre-pandemic baseline.

With increased resources thanks to the County and local partnerships, Hubs also have the capacity to offer case management, referrals, and improved data collection compared to smaller nonprofit food assistance providers. Many Hubs are collaborating with organizations to host summer camps, volunteer opportunities, programming with the police department, and other community activities. With additional County funding approved for FY22, the partnerships and services available at Hubs are expected to improve and grow.

There were approximately 1.7 children per household served by the Hubs, and approximately 41% of households included a senior. In comparison, 23% of the County are children and 13.7% are adults 65 years and older, showing that the Hubs were especially helpful for families and older adults.



Lessons Learned

The success of the Food Security Task Force, the Food Access Call Center, and the Consolidation Hubs lie not only with their ability to serve more residents, but also with their targeted approach to reach traditionally underserved populations. These findings are shown in the sections below.

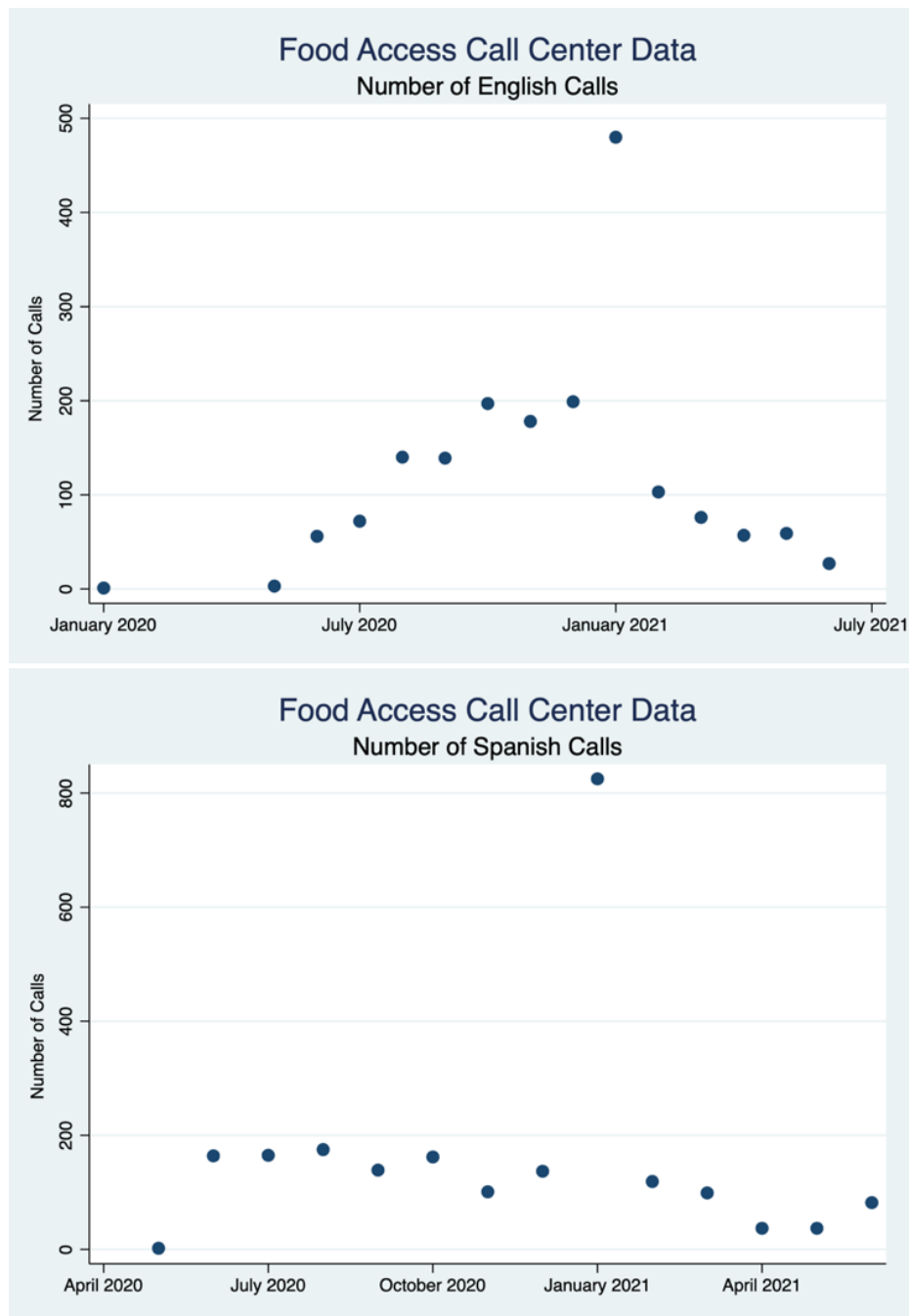
Looking ahead, the County has an opportunity to improve these new services and better address the gaps in food assistance that has existed before the pandemic. The County's current five-year Food Security Plan, released in 2017, called for recommendations including (among many others)ⁱⁱ:

1. Continue, expand, and standardize food data collection.
2. Build a comprehensive referral network for food security resources.
3. Increase availability of culturally appropriate food assistance.
4. Pilot neighborhood-level programs in specific zones.
5. Increase outreach network and capacity.

While the Food Council and the nonprofit sector have made steady progress toward the 2017 Food Security Plan's goals, the increased investment from the County in the past year has significantly advanced the recommendations listed above. These needs will not disappear after the pandemic. With the current Food Security Plan set to expire next year, the Council should consider a continued and elevated investment in food security to sustain the current momentum.

Lessons Learned: The Need for Spanish-language Services

Over 51% of all calls to the Food Access Call Center preferred Spanish, compared to 21% of Montgomery County residents who speak Spanish overall.ⁱⁱⁱ Additionally, as seen in the graphs below, the number of calls in English fell drastically in 2021, while the number of calls in Spanish have mostly remained steady in recent months. These trends suggest that the service is serving a gap for Spanish-speaking residents who may not be able to easily find assistance in their preferred language. By June 2021, Spanish-speaking calls to the Call Center have outnumbered English calls 3-to-1.

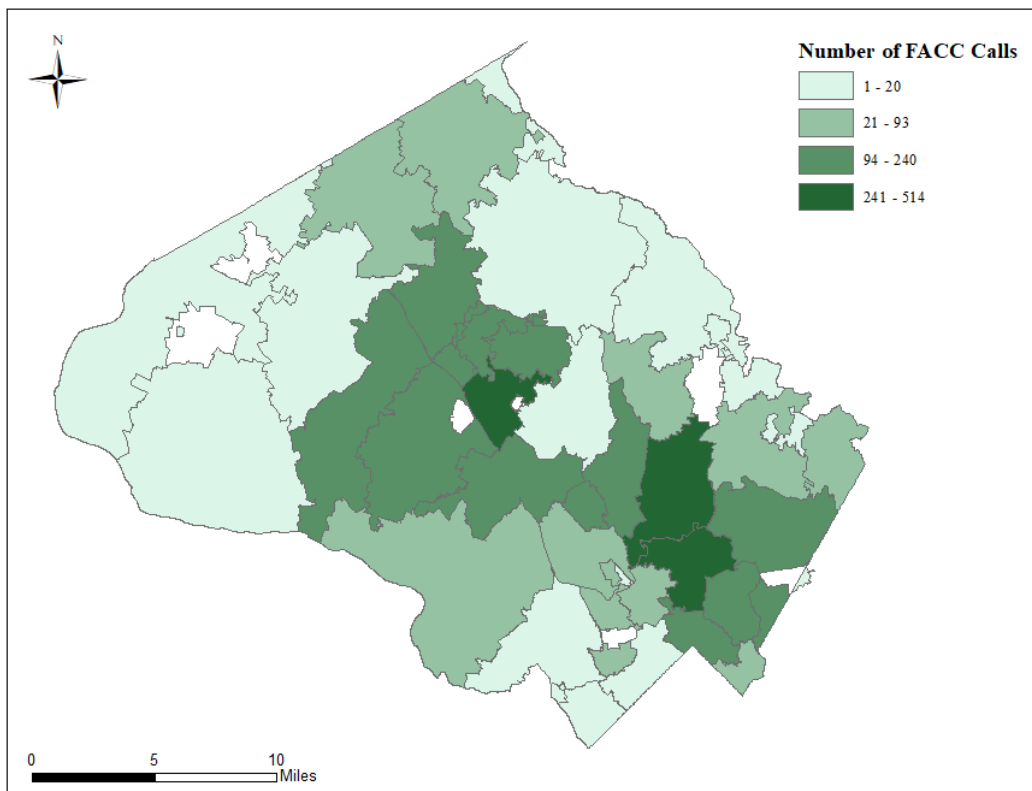


Lessons Learned: The Food Access Call Center Served High Need Areas

The Food Access Call Center was utilized by residents across the County, as shown in the map below. The call distribution matches Capital Area Food Bank’s estimated food insecurity levels across Montgomery County, indicating that the Call Center was able to respond to areas of high need.^{iv}

FACC is unique because it can track where food-insecure residents live, and thus where the need for additional food actually exists. Other data sets either project food insecurity rates through algorithms or rely on data based on the locations of food assistance *distributions*, not residents.

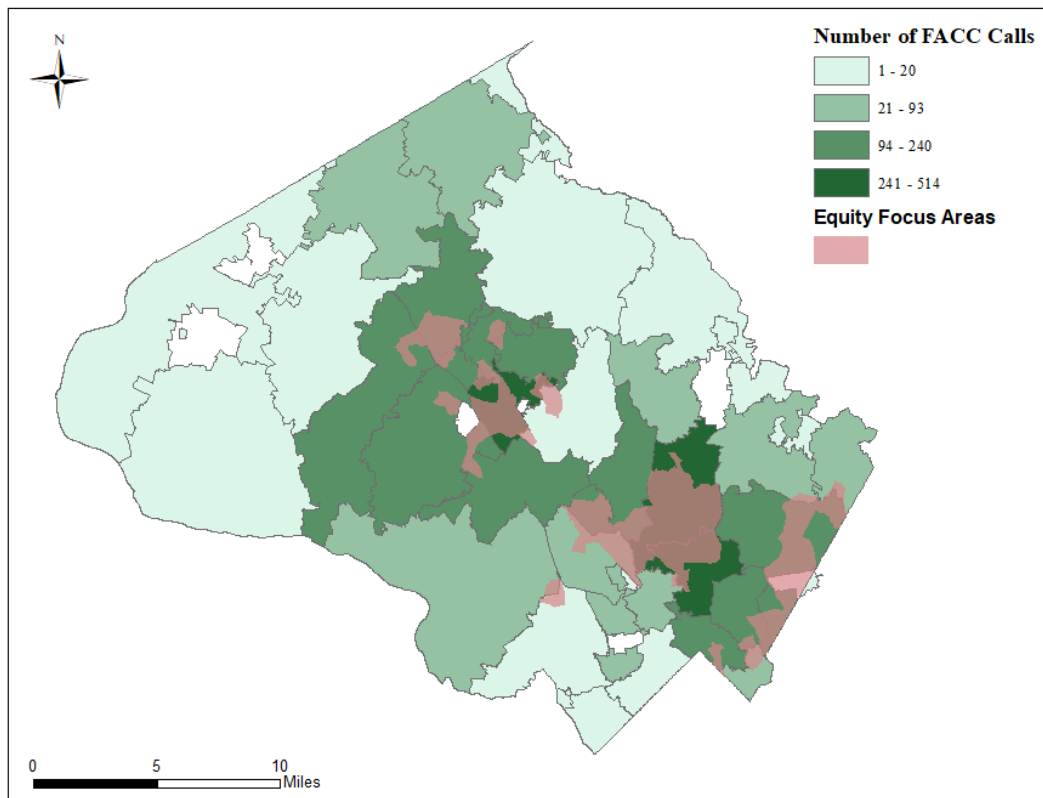
Food Access Call Center
Call Distribution in Montgomery County by ZIP Code



The above map shows the total number of calls to the Food Access Call Center by ZIP Code since June 2020. The map below depicts the same map overlaid with the Montgomery County Planning Department’s Equity Focus Areas, which are “characterized by high concentrations of lower-income people of color, who may also speak English less than very well.”^v The two maps are closely aligned.

Food Access Call Center

Call Distribution in Montgomery County by ZIP Code



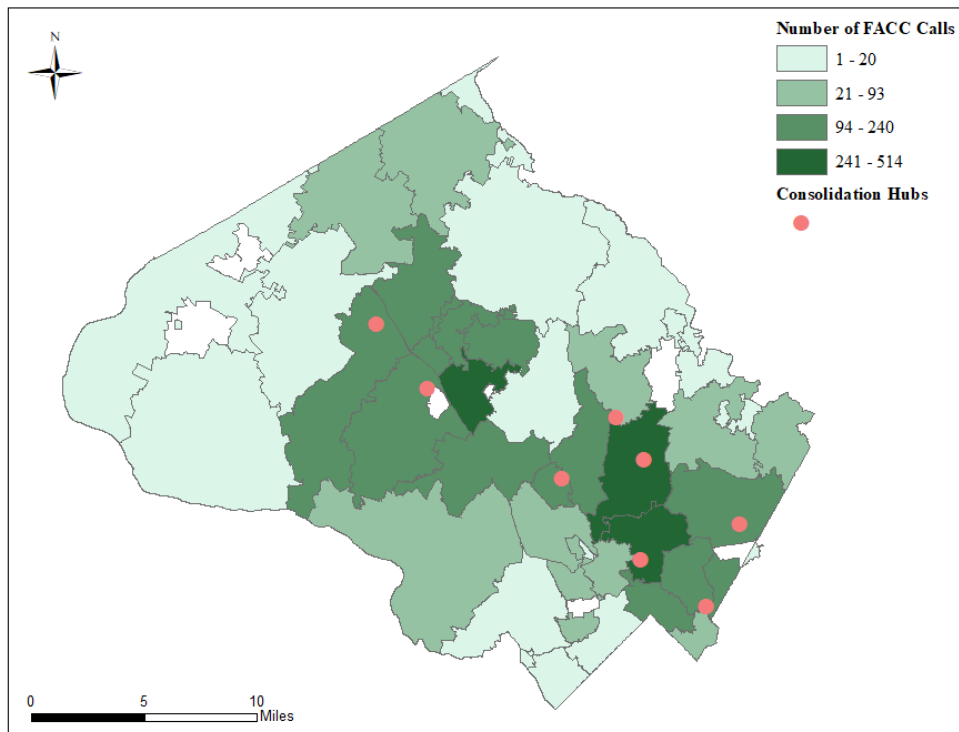
Lessons Learned: The Benefits of Comprehensive Referral Networks at Neighborhood Locations

As highlighted by the 2017 Food Security Plan, food-insecure populations often face other challenges, including unemployment or housing instability. The Food Access Call Center was able to capture some of these additional data points related to food-insecure residents within Montgomery County. Through their case management model, the Call Center collected data on whether a caller faces income insecurity (such as unemployment) or mobility challenges (such as being homebound or having difficulty accessing transportation). In the past year, 69% of callers reported income insecurity, and 39% reported limited mobility.

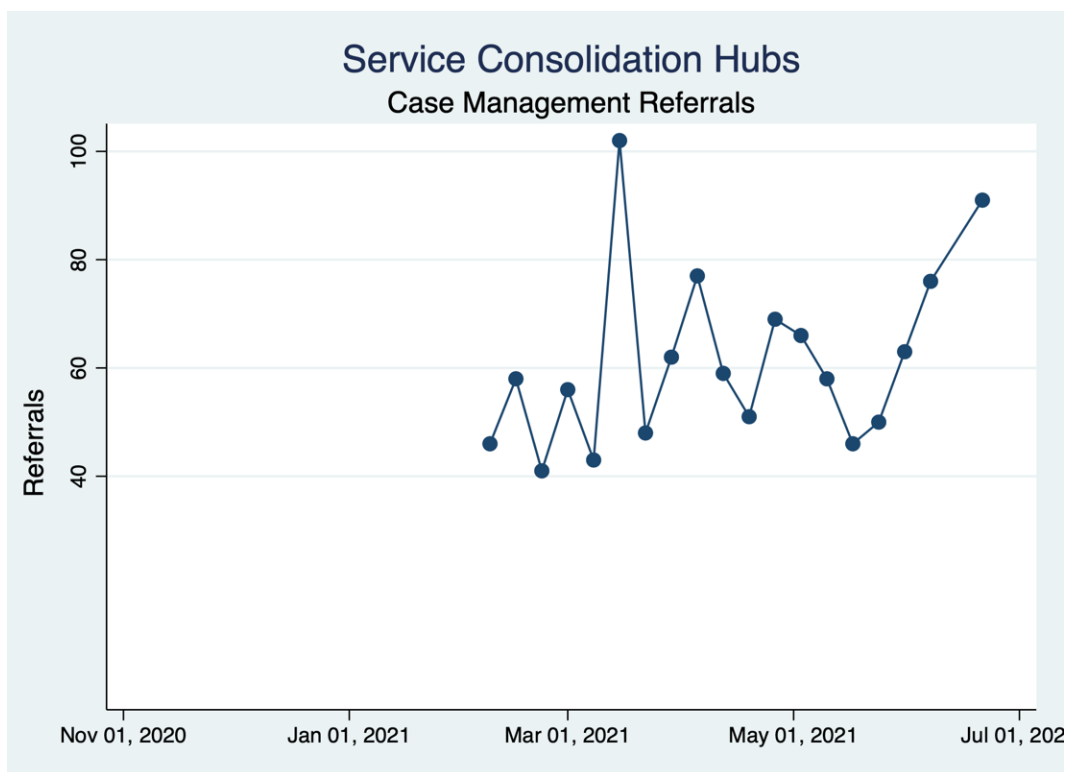
To address these needs, the Service Consolidation Hubs offered case management and referral services for rent assistance, employment services, legal assistance, and healthcare. As shown in the map below, each Service Consolidation Hub is located close to ZIP codes with a high number of calls to the FACC, indicating that the Hubs are in areas where food-insecure populations live:

Food Access Call Center

Call Distribution in Montgomery County by ZIP Code

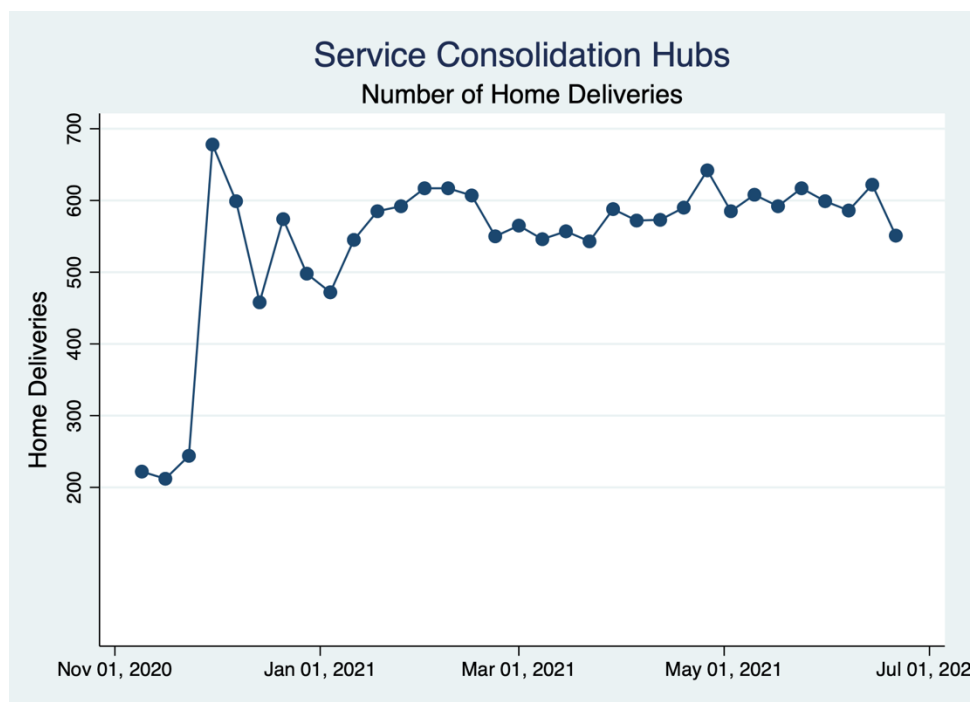


Additionally, in recent weeks, the need for referral services have not decreased:



While the number of case management referrals at Hubs vary week-by-week, there has never been less than 40 referrals per week. Since June, referrals have increased dramatically, even as the number of service encounters have slightly decreased. These patterns indicate a need for comprehensive, neighborhood-based referral networks. With additional County funding for case management already approved for FY22, Hubs can become another entry point for residents to access the many community and government benefits available to them.

In addition to referrals, Service Consolidation Hubs also reported data on their home delivery services for homebound seniors and other vulnerable populations. These deliveries are reported in the graph below:



The number of home deliveries at Hubs have remained steady throughout the entirety of 2021, indicating that these neighborhood locations play an important role in increasing accessibility to food resources for home-bound residents. Without continued support, many residents who have come to rely on home deliveries may be suddenly cut off from a needed service.

Lessons Learned: The County Can Provide Leadership and Support for Better Data Collection

One benefit of County-funded service programs such as the Food Access Call Center and the Service Consolidation Hubs is the County’s ability to require effective data collection. These requirements allow the County to better understand the scope of their hunger response efforts, as well as collect

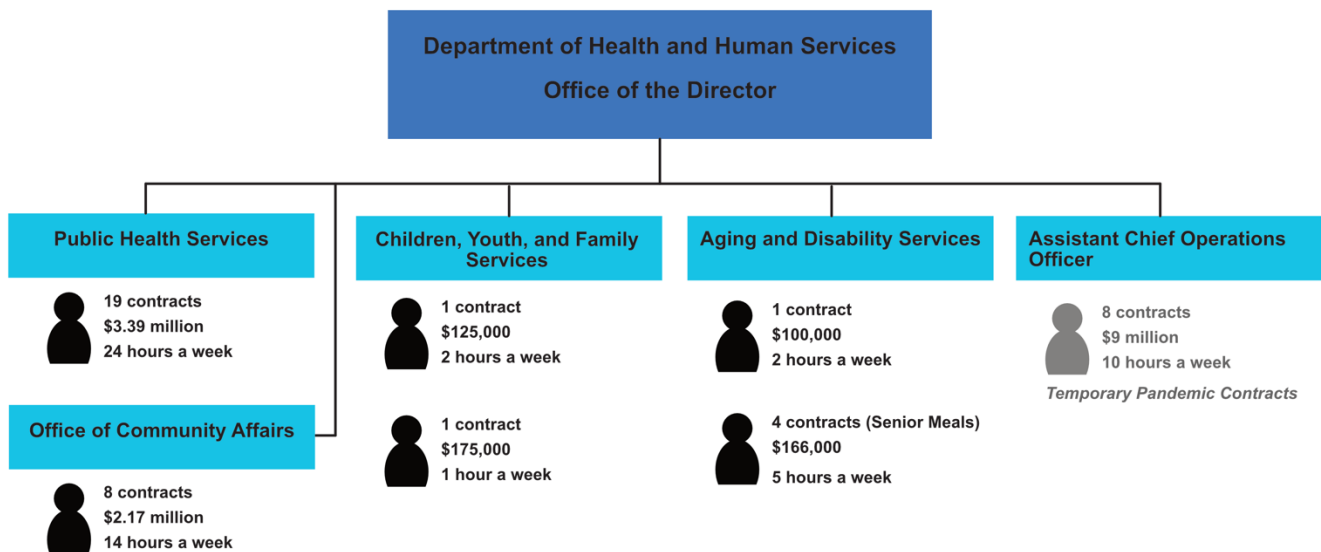
data points related to the “root causes” of food security, such as mobility or transportation challenges, income insecurity, and other needs.

Data collection is a priority among the local food assistance community as well as the national food banking community. However, many smaller service providers lack the capacity and expertise to engage in effective data collection. Through funding and training, Montgomery County can create a data collection model among its contracted food providers that can be adopted by the greater community.

Lessons Learned: The County’s Internal Resources Were Stressed

The Food Security Task Force provided effective coordination of food security initiatives and funding over the past year, but much of the day-to-day work of contract-monitoring and other services did not have a clear home within the County. As seen in the chart below, the County’s food assistance contracts are distributed throughout several service units within DHHS.

Food Assistance Contract Monitors within DHHS



There are currently six permanent contract monitors managing food assistance contracts, spread out across four Service Units within DHHS. In total, contract monitoring requires approximately 48 hours a week for contracts in the base budget, and an additional 10 hours a week for temporary emergency contracts during the pandemic. Other than the Manager of Food Security within the Public Health Services unit, none of the other contract monitors specialize in food security. Only two staff members have contract monitoring as a specific aspect of their job description; the rest are monitoring these food security contracts in addition to their primary responsibilities. While some of these contracts (such as senior meals) are more complicated and require coordination with their specific DHHS service unit, others are more general food contracts that could benefit from consolidation.

Recommendations

The food assistance community within Montgomery County came together during the pandemic to provide new initiatives that greatly expanded access to food resources for our most vulnerable residents. Crucially, many of the new initiatives within the County, including the Food Access Call Center and the Service Consolidation Hubs, expanded access for communities that were long underserved prior to the pandemic. The County's need for expanded Spanish resources, home deliveries, or large referral networks will be persistent.

The County has an opening to build upon their successes in the past year and grow these new food security initiatives into permanent resources for difficult-to-reach communities. This transition would require a centralized organizational body within the County to monitor and organize food assistance programming.

This paper recommends that the Council research and fund a permanent organizational body within the Executive Branch for food-specific issues. This new body could take on many forms, such as a permanent Office of Food Resiliency or a cross-departmental division headed by a Food Policy Director. Several models that exist in Baltimore City and Washington, DC, are described in the final section of this paper. The creation of this new organizational body can help coordinate and empower local service providers by focusing on four areas of responsibility:

1. Organizing internal government functions.

Coordination

Currently, there is only one dedicated staff member within the County government focused on food security issues. This staff member is located within the Public Health Services unit of DHHS. While the Food Security Manager is a trusted and valued partner in the greater food assistance community, the scope of hunger-relief work within the County government (including 34 contracts in the base budget, partnership-building activities, and additional outreach efforts such as the Food Access Call Center) far exceeds the capacity of one FTE.

A dedicated team for food security can consolidate many of the disparate food assistance contracts within DHHS, as well as help coordinate nonprofit food assistance contracts with other departmental programs in agriculture, housing and community affairs, and MCPS school food distribution. Additionally, centralization will increase the level of expertise in food security-related issues within the government, allowing for greater knowledge-sharing and relationship-building between contract monitors, food assistance providers, the Food Council, and policymakers.

Internal Advocate

In addition to greater coordination, a centralized food security team can act as a better advocate for food-insecure populations within the government. The pandemic has proven that food security is an urgent issue that affects every community throughout the County. Prior to the pandemic, the nonprofit hunger relief network was primarily self-organized through the Food Council. A new office, headed by a director with wide decision-making authority, can better tie the work of the nonprofit sector with policies and government initiatives. It can also increase the County's capacity to research and target areas underserved by nonprofit organizations.

2. Increasing Community Access to the Government

A County Partner for the Food Council

The Food Council currently plays an important role organizing nonprofit food assistance providers within the County, but it is limited in its ability to connect these providers with government programs and benefits. With a singular area of focus, the Food Council has less capacity compared to the County to tie food insecurity programs with other areas related to poverty, such as healthcare, housing, and homelessness. A high-level office dedicated to food security issues within the County can strengthen the nonprofit sector's initiatives by creating opportunities for food assistance to be paired with government services that food-insecure populations are already using.

Leveraging the County's Capacity for Mass Communication

The Food Access Call Center highlighted the County's capacity to centralize information and quickly communicate across many communities. With a dedicated team, the County can work with the Food Council to create better messaging and outreach efforts for hard-to-reach communities, taking advantage of the County's existing 311 systems, texting services, online portals, and more.

3. Data Collection

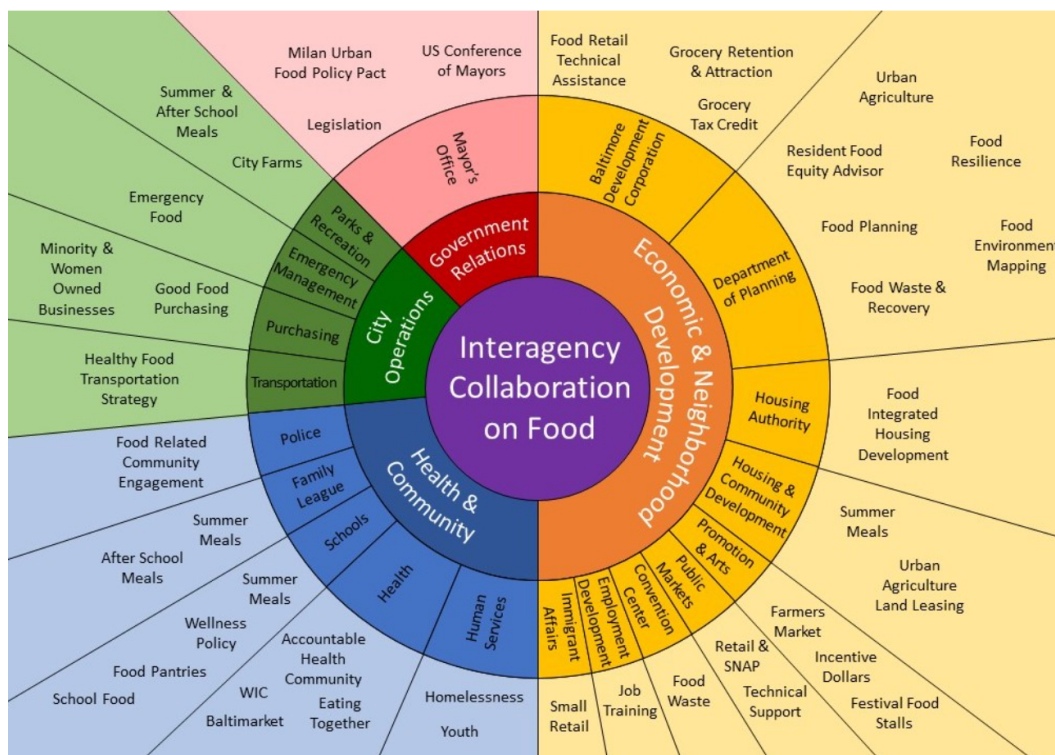
The wealth of data available through the County's food provider webpage, the Food Access Call Center, and the Service Consolidation Hubs is evidence of the County's ability to improve data collection across the food assistance community. While the Food Council can encourage better data collection among its members, the County can mandate data collection as part of their contracts—a practice that has resulted in a significant increase in data collection during the pandemic. These data collection efforts will help quantify the County's food assistance efforts and identify gaps in service.

Centralized Food Resiliency Offices in Other Counties

Baltimore City's Food Policy and Planning Division

Located within the Baltimore City Department of Planning, the Food Policy and Planning Division is responsible for overseeing the Baltimore Food Policy Initiative, which “uses food as a catalyst to address health, economic, and environmental disparities.”^{vi} The division is headed by a Food Policy Director, and is supported by a Food Access Planner, a Food Resilience Planner, and a Food Systems Planner. Its “three pillars” of responsibility include overseeing:

1. The Food Policy Action Coalition, a coalition of local nonprofit food assistance providers and other stakeholders similar to our own Food Council.
2. The Resident Food Equity Advisors, a team of Baltimore City residents passionate about eliminating food insecurity.
3. Interagency Collaboration, a model through which the Food Policy and Planning Division coordinates a cross-departmental response to food security. The model is summarized below according to the Division's website:



Source: Baltimore City Department of Planning

Washington, DC's Food Policy Council

Washington, DC's Food Policy Council consists of 13 members appointed by the DC Council. While the thirteen members represent leaders across nonprofit and for-profit organizations, they report to the Food Policy Director, a high-level government director located within the DC Office of Planning. Through this partnership between nonprofit organizations and government agencies, the Food Policy Council can connect the perspectives and expertise of the private sector with the larger policy and planning initiatives of the city.^{vii}

Regional Momentum

The Covid-19 pandemic revealed gaps in the food and safety net systems in counties across the nation. Out of counties in America within 15% of Montgomery County's population and median household income, both Prince George's County in Maryland as well as Bergen County in New Jersey created a Food Security Task Force during the pandemic. Other counties coordinated emergency food programs out of existing divisions in their Health and Human Services departments. Among Covid recovery plans currently published out of these counties, Prince George's County's Task Force recently listed "Create and Fund a County Food Security Office" as one of their recommendations.^{viii}

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