

Tips for Responding to Hunger in a Pandemic

*With gratitude to Ryan Cumming (ELCA) from whom I borrowed liberally;
any mistakes are mine, Andrew Kang Bartlett (Presbyterian Hunger Program, PCUSA)*

This is completely new territory for many of us. As we respond to help slow the spread of COVID-19, the routine daily movements of individuals, faith communities, businesses, and more are grounding to a halt. Shelves stand empty inside many stores and most restaurant owners have posted 'Closed' signs. Many people are worried about having enough to get through the current crisis.

For many of our neighbors, the vulnerability of economic uncertainty and the concern of not having enough food or supplies to last the week or month was and remains a daily reality, exacerbated by the shutdown of daily life and the new significant threats posed by the virus.

The emergency food system – pantries, community meals, soup kitchens and more – is designed to provide for neighbors in need. But to abide by the best advice about managing the COVID-19 crisis, changes must be made. Emergency food must now follow guidelines to:

- not congregate in large groups
- practice social distancing
- protect volunteers (while also addressing the great need for volunteers; see '#7 Give Time' below)

Also, many emergency feeding programs rely on neighbors giving generously from their resources, but they may now have less to share as they stock up food and household necessities to last 2-4 weeks. Food banks and feeding programs can check with schools, which may have surplus to share as they close down.

Gold Star for Food Banks

The San Antonio Food Bank began a month-long effort on March 5th to prepare 300,000 "corona preparedness kits" containing a 14-day supply of non-perishable food, as well as hand sanitizers, cleaning supplies, diapers and pet food, to be distributed through local and mobile pantries, and especially senior centers, where the need for such kits could be higher.

Thank you to the many Hunger Action Congregations, other congregations, and individuals across the country who are creatively and steadfastly continuing their hunger ministries during this crisis!

Hunger is a serious challenge, even as our attention is focused on the health crisis at hand, and in many ways, it may get worse. What can we do to ensure that the virus that has brought so much of daily life to a grinding halt does not do the same to our work to end hunger?

Below are some tips to support neighbors facing food insecurity during these challenging times. For more suggestions, you can visit the [California Association of Food Banks](#), which has suggestions for adapting hunger programs to meet the current reality.

1 Change

If you work at or run a pantry, consider alternatives to your current model. This might mean providing a drive-through service, instead of indoor pick-up. Some food pantries have moved from a client-choice model to preparing bags, so that clients are not moving through the pantry or congregating together in lines or waiting areas. Be sure to have adequate signage and other communications if you make this shift. Also, remember to consider clients who do not have cars. One way to maintain client choice may be to offer 2 or more different types of bags, with different items in them. As a volunteer greets each guest, offer them the option of which bag they would prefer. This allows them the choice, while still maintaining the social distance needed with the new distribution. (see article about new study (3/17/20) on the persistence of COVID-19 in air and on surfaces in 'Articles of Interest' at the bottom)

Some pantry volunteers offer to retrieve perishable items (produce, eggs, dairy, meat, etc.) and bring them out to the clients. With stores running low on disinfectant supplies and paper goods, consider adding these to your distribution, if you don't already.

2 Know

Knowing your neighbors is a key part of participating in any successful feeding ministry. So, too, is knowing as much as possible about COVID-19, including who is most vulnerable, what the symptoms are, and where testing might be available. We know that some neighbors will be more vulnerable to COVID-19, depending on age. Consider increasing the distribution amounts for them, so that they don't have to leave the house as often. If your ministry has clients with other underlying conditions, try reaching out to them to make sure they are healthy. If possible, prepare separate bags for special diets, including for people with conditions like high blood pressure or diabetes.

Also, help clients and volunteers learn more about COVID-19 by sharing information about the virus and about testing options. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have print resources available online at www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/communication/factsheets.html. Consider posting these or including them in bags of food for guests. Your local county health department may be able to share with you information about testing sites, including restrictions. Remember, some testing sites, including drive-through testing sites, are only open to people with a physician's order.

3 Reduce

Reduce the number of people gathering at the pantry at one time. If possible, consider providing appointment times for clients to reduce the number of people gathering. If you already use an appointment system, reduce the number of people allowed at each appointment and consider expanding hours or availability to help diffuse the flow of people. The [California Association of Food Banks](#) also suggests cross-training volunteers to do multiple jobs and evaluating how many volunteers or staff are essential to help reduce the number of workers at each shift.

4 Protect

It is not known how long COVID-19 can live on surfaces. As you receive donations, talk with your suppliers about the steps they have taken to reduce the spread of the virus. Be sure anyone working in your facility or handling donations is not sick and is practicing good hygiene – washing hands frequently, avoiding touching their face, and avoiding contact with others to the extent possible. As you stock up on cleaning supplies for clients, be sure that your pantry has enough soap, sanitizer, disinfectant supplies, etc. for frequent cleaning and disinfecting for volunteers and the pantry, too. When packing bags of food for clients, reduce the number of people who are touching food or other donations as much as possible, and ensure that everyone who packs bags, stocks shelves or otherwise works with donations washes their hands. If you use clipboards for intake forms, sanitize them often.

5 Donate (But Ask First!)

Now is a critical time to accompany local feeding programs and ministries. As more folks hoard supplies and food, ensuring that our neighbors have enough is more important than ever. If you

are able to support a local pantry or feeding ministry, please do so. But **before you drop off a large donation, call them first!** Managing donations takes a lot of volunteer time, which many ministries and programs may not have right now. Others may have specific needs, depending on their community. Try to reach out first, before choosing how to provide the best support. [See pdf handout on [Donating Extra Food During COVID-19 National Emergency](#)]

6 Give

These are going to be trying times for anti-hunger work for a very long time. If you have the means, **prayerfully consider supporting local hunger ministries by donating online**, if the option is available. You can also continue to support the work of domestic and international ministries of the Presbyterian Hunger Program by visiting presbyterianmission.org/donate/H999999. With churches closed and offering plates not being passed, it can be easy to forget how much our local, national and international ministries depend on the regular financial support. Now is also the season of giving for the One Great Hour of Sharing, so please give to OGHS at pcusa.org/oghs.

7 Give Time

Many feeding program volunteers are over 60 or may have other risk factors. Many programs are in great need of volunteers, especially in areas where the virus is spreading quickly. If you are blessed with time to donate and you are not in a higher risk category, please share your time with a nearby feeding program. You can and should still observe good social distancing and sanitary practices. Call your local feeding program to find out how you can be helpful. Find your nearest food bank at feedingamerica.org/find-your-local-foodbank to learn about volunteer opportunities on the website or by calling the food bank. www.foodpantries.org may also have a listing of sites near you.

8 Support

Hunger is never just about food. Hunger is often a symptom of deeper vulnerabilities. Some of these economic vulnerabilities are being disclosed in rapid and jarring fashion now. The immediate impact of the widespread shutdown is being felt by service and hospitality industry workers in restaurants, bars, coffeeshops, and hotels especially. Many workers in these

industries work for hourly wages without paid sick leave. Servers and others depend primarily on tips, which won't come when the business is closed. The long-term impact of the pandemic on the service industry and small businesses may be significant. Even as we follow the advice to stay home, **consider purchasing a gift card from a local business**, like a restaurant, coffeeshop or retail store, to use after the current crisis ends. These businesses provide the jobs that are needed to help people feed themselves and their families in the long-term. Many restaurants are also offering take-out options. If you are healthy and can do carry-out or curbside service, remember to tip the workers well. If possible, try to make the tip for carry-out at the same level as the tip you might leave for a sit-down meal.

Support for those working in the food chain – farmworkers, food servers, and all those who labor to grow, harvest, prepare, and serve our food – are among those most impacted by economic and health effects of COVID-19 and unequal access to medical care. Adopting attitudes of empathy and care is needed to protect our most vulnerable.

At a time when we are seeing impacts on distant and even global supply chains, we are reminded of the need to promote local economies and community resilience. It is a great time to buy nutrient-rich food from local farms in your area and to take advantage of home delivery where possible. In the long run, by supporting policies and models for community owned land and shared ecological stewardship, we can all ensure there is a future where local organic agriculture supports our health, carbon is sequestered in our soils, and sustainable stewardship of the earth provides a pathway for our generation and future generations to connect with the land and to each other.

9 Advocate

The House of Representatives passed H.R. 6201 – the Families First Coronavirus Response Act and the Senate just approved (3/18/20) the bill as well. The legislation helps to ensure that our neighbors in need will have access to nutritious food during the crisis by:

- Increasing funding for [TEFAP](#), the federal program that allows pantries and food banks to purchase food at low prices;
- Expanding funding for [low-income pregnant women and mothers](#) whose jobs are impacted by COVID-19; and
- Providing additional meals for elderly Americans who rely on the [Senior Nutrition](#)

In addition, the Act prevents changes to the SNAP program that were slated to go into effect on April 1. States will be able to make exceptions to the work requirements of SNAP during economic downturns, like the kind we are seeing now.

Stay up-to-date on the latest legislative information related to COVID-19 by following the Presbyterian Office of Public Witness on [Facebook](#), on their [Take Action page](#), and you can sign up for Action Alerts [here](#).

Gold Star for Advocacy

Advocacy works! The many public comments and independent media has been credited with helping push through the USDA “public charge” rule for SNAP benefits on March 13.

See full opinion ([84 pages](#)) and the [2-page injunction](#).

10 Witness

The church is and always has been caught in the tension of the already-but-not-yet Reign of God. We know by faith that God, even now, is moving the world toward wholeness and healing that surpasses even our deepest hopes during a pandemic. The church is called to bear witness to that hope to one another and to our neighbors. To be church means to be a sign of the bright future God has in store for all creation. But to be church also means to take seriously the threats to our health and wholeness now. As Lutherans (*and Presbyterians*), we affirm that the complete healing to come and the healing we can experience now are gifts from God. The wisdom of public health officials, the empathy of neighbors sacrificing together to stem the spread of disease, and the tireless efforts of community leaders are gifts from God.

Maintaining social distancing, practicing good hygiene, and even changing the way we worship together may seem like mere practical steps. But they reflect some of our core beliefs as people of faith: that human wisdom is a gift of God to give effective shape to our love for one another; that protecting our most vulnerable neighbors is part of our vocation as the people of God; and that authentic worship can take many forms. Our faith also calls us to accompany our neighbors facing heightened anxiety because of both health- and economic-related uncertainties. To witness to hope means to be part of practical solutions, to show empathy and to respect the dignity of all our neighbors, especially in challenging times. It is to remember that even as we maintain social distance, we do so out of love and concern and not out of fear.

To be the witness God calls the church to be means being both wise and “foolish” at the same time – wise, in that our actions are driven by the best information we have available, and “foolish,” in that we bear witness to hope, even in the midst of crisis. At work in this tension is *where* we are called to be and *who* we are called to be, during a pandemic – and long after. [Special thanks to Ryan Cumming for this ‘Witness’ section.]

To learn more about the church’s response and resources, visit the PC(USA)’s website at www.pcusa.org/covid19.

Articles of Interest

- [‘There Is Plenty of Food in the Country’ ... but, on the other hand... Food banks are seeing volunteers disappear and supplies evaporate as coronavirus fears mount](#)
- [Food-Bank Response to Coronavirus Runs the Gamut](#)
- [Coronavirus can persist in air for hours and on surfaces for days](#)
- [How to Safely Feed Food-Insecure Seniors During a Pandemic](#)
- [What to Buy \(and What to Skip\) to Prepare for Coronavirus](#)
- [How is the Feeding America network of food banks responding to the coronavirus?](#)
- [Frequently Asked Questions on Coronavirus and Food from USDA](#)
- [Mike Davis on COVID-19: The monster is at the door](#)
- [As coronavirus spreads, farmers fear market closures and lost income](#)
- [A Letter to America’s Gardeners](#)
- [Emerging human infectious diseases and the links to global food production](#)
- [COVID-19: the gendered impacts of the outbreak](#)
- [The food politics of Coronavirus](#)