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## Providing Food Assistance in a Pandemic: Views and Lessons Learned from the Frontlines in Northwest Mississippi

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## Providing Food Assistance in a Pandemic: Views and Lessons Learned from the Frontlines in Northwest Mississippi – Executive Summary<sup>1</sup>

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*Center for Population Studies, University of Mississippi*  
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**Project Description:** The Center for Population Studies (CPS) at the University of Mississippi (UM) has partnered with the Maddox Foundation (Hernando, MS) and the Community Foundation of Northwest Mississippi (CFNM) to explore changes in communities across an 11-county region as a way to identify funding priorities designed to address challenges and build upon assets in the region. With a grant from the Maddox Foundation, the CFNM launched FEED Northwest Mississippi to provide emergency funding for area food pantries, especially ones located in rural areas (CFNM 2020). This initiative has now expanded with a host of additional contributors to the FEED Fund. Results of research involving the food pantries and similar organizations will inform additional funding priorities of Maddox and the CFNM in response to the impacts of COVID-19 on individuals, families, and their communities.

**Food Scarcity in Mississippi:** For the first three months of the pandemic, the US Census Bureau conducted a weekly Household Pulse Survey in the United States, as a means of measuring the pandemic's social and economic effects on households in relation to food security, employment, spending patterns, housing, physical and mental health, access to health care, and educational disruption (US Census Bureau 2020). Data showed that adults surveyed in Mississippi reported having continual struggles with access to food and other resources throughout the pandemic, calling for longer-term response and recovery strategies.

**Food Pantry Research Methods:** During May and June, 2020, a total of 33 food pantry/organization representatives in northwest Mississippi (out of 60 contacted) consented to being interviewed by phone, with the data being used to inform future funding priorities of Maddox and CFNM in that region of the state. The group consisted of individuals whose names and contact information were provided by CFNM and the CPS and represented organizations based in nine counties and one operating statewide. Aside from two interviews representing a statewide organization, the nine counties represented and include: Bolivar, Coahoma, DeSoto, Leflore, Marshall, Panola, Quitman, Sunflower, and Tate. Respondents' perceptions of their experiences serving people during the pandemic were organized around five thematic areas: (1) primary role(s) of the organizations before and throughout the pandemic; (2) organizational and community challenges and concerns related to the COVID-19 pandemic; (3) pandemic

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<sup>1</sup> This executive summary is based on a full project report informing the planning and evaluation needs of the Center for Population Studies and its partners. Do not cite without permission from the author(s) or the Center for Population Studies. This research was conducted in collaboration with the Community Foundation of Northwest Mississippi to inform the FEED Fund. It was supported by the Maddox Foundation with additional resources from the University of Mississippi Disaster Resilience Constellation and involvement from the University of Mississippi Community First Research Center for Wellbeing and Creative Achievement. The ideas expressed here do not necessarily represent the views of the partner organizations.

awareness activities at the community level; (4) resources and partnerships in pandemic response; and (5) potential solutions to barriers faced during the pandemic.

**Primary Role(s) of the Organizations:** In most cases, respondent organizations had provided multiple services to the public prior to the pandemic, but the pandemic forced them to suspend many of them due to having to have to close down their buildings for social distancing/safety reasons. Changes to organizational roles due to the pandemic, as they relate to demand for services, included the need to address increasing demand for food assistance, overall, and more frequently throughout the month, as well as serving new families not previously needing this assistance. The following list summarizes the variety of services provided by organizations, with most of them being temporarily suspended:

- Emergency food assistance and programs to address food insecurity in the long-term
- Workforce development (computer training, resume writing, interview prep.)
- Supplemental education for youth (mentoring, afterschool tutoring)
- Assistance to senior citizens
- Housing assistance (access to affordable housing, payment of rent and utilities)
- Health and nutrition training
- Mental health counseling
- Acquisition of prescription medicine, clothing, and gas for vehicles
- Diapers and related supplies and specialized care focused on women's wellness

**Challenges and Concerns Relating to COVID-19:** Respondents were asked to describe challenges and concerns associated with the pandemic faced by their organization and the people they serve in Mississippi. The following is a detailed list of their observations:

- Facilities closed to the public and suspension of programs normally occurring indoors
- Services, primarily food distribution, limited to curbside pick-up and offsite deliveries
- Loss of personal and holistic assistance due to required social distancing and shut-downs
- Limited transportation throughout the region, curtailing access to food pantries and supplies
- Closing of schools, limiting access to food and academic training for students
- Job loss and furloughs increasing household-level financial and food insecurity
- Too few volunteers to serve or deliver food, due to the health risks of COVID-19 exposure
- Limited access to Internet service and computers for completing basic tasks and for training
- Mental health services suspended, increasing the pressure of pandemic's effects on people
- Shortage of sanitizing solutions, paper products, masks, and other basic supplies
- Scarcity of some foods (e.g. produce, meat) accompanied by higher prices
- Limited access to educational materials and supplies for students to complete their work

**Pandemic Awareness Activities:** Respondents were asked to describe community-level pandemic awareness activities involving their organization. Most of them have been focused on their own staff and volunteers when distributing food and delivering any other services. Other awareness activities are described below:

- Consistent use of masks, gloves, and sanitizers by volunteers and staff
- Limited pandemic awareness activities implemented at the community level

- Public service announcements by only a few organizations via local media outlets
- Distribution of brochures on health, safety, and opioid risks by one organization
- Promotion of the importance of completing the 2020 Census by two organizations

**Resources and Partnerships in Pandemic Response:** Respondents identified important resources or assets within organizations and the community when responding to the pandemic, along with the partnerships they perceive to be vital to their work and their success:

- High level of value placed on having volunteers available for service delivery
- Support from churches, food pantries, and other organizations (donations of food and money)
- Grants and other donations from Maddox and the CFNM
- Food bank networks and their response to increased demand
- Ability to network, share information, and train using webinars and Zoom conferences
- Local media outlets assisting with public service announcements
- Love
- Value of strong social service and faith-based networks when reaching out for help
- Relationships with retailers and grocery distributors for acquiring food and supplies
- Use of social media to request assistance, advertise services, and document success

***Demand vs. Resources:***

- Concerns about the limited number of volunteers
- Need for larger food distribution sites and storage space/equipment for perishable foods
- Ability to obtain smaller packages of donated meats for distribution at food pantries
- Transportation options for people needing services

**Barriers and Potential Solutions:** Respondents listed several resources in short supply, including those that are difficult for residents to find, that serve as barriers to meeting the needs of individuals, households, and organizations. Respondents then discussed potential solutions and how they may be developed through partnerships at various levels, as listed here:

***Barriers:***

- Resources in short supply – disinfectants, paper products, certain food items, affordable food
- Limited strategies for distributing extra food and avoiding waste
- Not having tools, supplies, and training for community-level or home-based gardens
- Limited technological access as an essential tool for completing tasks
- Shortage of reliable transportation for acquiring what people need
- Too few volunteers
- Not knowing how to pay for rent or utilities when assistance programs end
- Limited school programs and meals provided for students
- Suspension of mental health assistance addressing isolation, depression, and addiction
- Disruption of employment opportunities and layoffs/furloughs
- Poor rural infrastructure challenging access to services

***Solutions:***

- Expand access to the Internet by creating hotspots using school buses equipped with Wi-Fi
- Provide culturally-appropriate meal plans at food pantries for children and for adults
- Secure equipment and space to accommodate bulk storage of food
- Develop strategies for distributing extra food in a timely manner, minimizing waste

- Develop continuous farmers markets and online purchasing options to increase access to fresh food and to support local producers

**Recommendations for Future Programs and Crisis Response:** Drawing from the interview data and solutions offered by the 33 respondents, the following recommendations for future funding, programming, and other responses to the crisis at hand, could enhance their immediate efforts to meet people’s needs, foster optimism, and help service providers articulate what is possible for their organizations to accomplish as they move into their “new normal” - a future of unknowns. Recommendations are:

- Build upon existing networks, form working groups, and coordinate the development of solutions and responses to stated needs through strong partnerships, as a means of increasing the visibility and effectiveness of individual organizations and collective goals.
- Build upon and create new partnerships and communication strategies to expand the pool of available volunteers working on the frontlines with food pantries and other organizations.
- Identify existing sources of Wi-Fi access and computers to be expanded for broader public use at multiple locations in towns and rural areas.
- Research and establish alternative food purchasing options, such as through continuous farmers markets and online purchasing of local products, to help address food insecurity, reduce transportation barriers to obtaining food and healthy food options, and build markets for local producers needing to expand their customer base within closer proximity to them.

**Conclusion:** As some respondents emphasized, quality of life in the northwest region of Mississippi, especially in the Delta, has been substandard for many years. The pandemic has only worsened these conditions. As with other disasters, the pandemic has further revealed long-existing social and economic inequalities entrenched in the region. Nonetheless, there is also a history of community action, and such efforts were found through this study. With the pandemic creating new shocks and stresses in people’s everyday lives, it is even more critical for funders like Maddox and the CFNM and myriad partners at all levels to invest in long-term solutions that comprehensively raise the standards of the region to levels that can more successfully absorb the effects of crisis events and ongoing processes of social change.

## References

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