

TO: Senate Committee on Environment and Natural Resources
FROM: Katie Pearmine, Strategic Sourcing Manager, Oregon Food Bank
DATE: June 4, 2020
RE: How We Can Respond to COVID-19 to Emerge Stronger



It is no secret that Oregonians face perhaps the biggest challenge of our lifetimes. Our shared task is to lead our state through this public health and economic crisis so that we may emerge stronger on the other side.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the number of Oregonians facing hunger has doubled. A report from Oregon State University estimates that 900,000 Oregonians — one in five — are now food insecure.

Within these statistics, we also know COVID-19 disproportionately impacts communities of color — both in economic and health outcomes. While unemployment has increased across all demographics, it has skyrocketed among Black, Indigenous and other People of Color (BIPOC), according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. These inequities are exacerbated among communities not eligible for certain types of federal aid, including many essential workers in Oregon’s immigrant community.

Oregon Food Bank’s mission is to eliminate hunger and its root causes. We pursue this goal in two key ways: we foster community connections to help people access nutritious food today; and we build community power to dismantle systems and policies that drive hunger and poverty. Our Network of 21 regional food banks and 1,400 partner agencies continue to work tirelessly to ensure that Oregonians are able to put food on the table in the wake of this pandemic.

How Oregon Food Bank’s work has shifted during COVID-19

With demand for food assistance doubling in Oregon over the past two months, we are resolute in ensuring that food — an essential human need and right — is available to all.

We are grateful for \$8 million dollars the state has invested in emergency food secured by Oregon, including federal funds drawn in through FEMA. This funding is essential to our Network’s efforts to meet increased demand — allowing food purchases to fill the interim period before additional federal aid arrives in July. This has leveraged our ability to purchase food at-scale statewide while also investing in local communities. Regional food banks have made purchases from food suppliers and grocers in every corner of the state — including produce, meat, dairy and seafood.

We have shifted our food sourcing and distribution practices to keep as much nutritious food flowing as possible statewide. These shifts reflect the need to implement public health requirements, including social distancing protocols. Staffing and volunteer allocations have been adjusted to better support local food assistance sites — allowing for contactless drive-up and delivery options at many locations. It also means that congregate meals are no longer possible, creating an additional gap that especially affects seniors and people experiencing houselessness. Our Network is addressing this by increasing our capacity to deliver food to people facing challenges accessing food distribution sites.

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The health and safety of essential workers in the food supply chain is critical

It is critical that our food supply remains strong during the pandemic. Recent COVID-19 outbreaks at food processing plants in Oregon and around the nation harm essential workers and their families, creating further disruptions in the supply chain.

We applaud Oregon's investment of \$30 million to create safe conditions for workers at farms and in food processing plants. This is a critical investment both in the health and safety of workers and the continuity of our operations at all levels of the food supply chain.

SNAP is our best tool to prevent food insecurity

The most important tool we have to reduce hunger and maintain purchasing power for food is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). With new federal options in the wake of COVID-19, SNAP has an even greater ability to ensure eligible families are able to purchase food. SNAP gives families a lifeline, supports local grocers and keeps demand strong in the food supply chain. Further, SNAP is federally-funded for all who are eligible.

We commend the Oregon Department of Human Services (DHS) for its commitment to exercising every available federal option to invest in SNAP through various stimulus bills. The result is additional support for families and communities.

Recommendations for the state of Oregon

As we face the long road to recovery from this pandemic, we call on leaders at all levels to demonstrate a heightened sense of urgency to ensure our families and our communities have access to nutritious food during this crisis.

- **What Oregon can do now:**
 - *Urgent: Process all Unemployment Insurance (UI) claims.* We must take immediate steps to ensure Oregonians who have filed claims have cases processed as soon as possible to put money in people's pockets.
 - *Conduct robust SNAP outreach to ensure eligible families understand available benefits.* For example, people who are waiting for UI benefits, those without access to the internet.
 - *Make it easier to apply for SNAP.* Reduce barriers to "sign" over the phone, since the online application is only available in English.
 - *Allow SNAP to be used at restaurants* by seniors, people with disabilities and those experiencing houselessness.

- **Special session recommendations:**
 - We must not balance our budget on the backs of Oregonians who are already hurting — nor exacerbate inequities that have already been widened.
 - We need to prioritize programs like the [Oregon Worker Relief Fund](#) that address gaps faced by immigrant families.
 - We need to consider extending eviction protections and rent assistance.
 - We need action to preserve vital human services in the state budget.

Thank you very much for your time and commitment to supporting Oregonians. With your leadership and support, we can all emerge stronger from this crisis.

