

# FRAC

Food Research & Action Center



## **Hunger and Its Solutions in New Jersey:**

Landscape Analysis of Current Initiatives, Recommended Action,  
and Emerging Opportunities for Further Investment

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# Executive Summary

## Goal 1: Enhance Cross-Sector Coordination and Expand Community Outreach

## Goal 2: Maximize Equitable Food Purchasing Power and Procurement Systems

## Goal 3: Build Infrastructure Necessary to Leverage Policy and Program Opportunities

**F**ood insecurity is a significant social determinant of health that affects far too many people in New Jersey. In 2020, 1 in 12 households experienced food insecurity, meaning 285,000 New Jersey households did not have reliable access to affordable, nutritious food. There are stark disparities in food insecurity that exist within the state, which must be addressed to create an equitable opportunity for good health for all. Community disinvestment and systems of oppression like systemic racism have resulted in disproportionate burdens of food insecurity along geographic lines and by race and ethnicity. COVID-19 has exacerbated longstanding disparities in food insecurity and access to healthy food. Analysis of the Census Household Pulse Survey shows that in 2021, 14 percent of Black households and 18 percent of Latino households in New Jersey indicated that they sometimes or often did not have enough to eat, experienced “food insufficiency,” compared to 5 percent of white households.

Despite the seeming ubiquity and severity of food insecurity, there are many actionable solutions to address this issue effectively and equitably, and implementing these solutions has meaningful impacts on population health, the economy, and community resiliency. There are a multitude of exemplary existing initiatives to address hunger in New Jersey. During COVID-19, diverse community organizations pivoted to diligently address this issue, and state agencies worked to implement effective federal flexibilities that helped mitigate food insecurity. Yet more must be done to meet unacceptable levels of poverty and hunger across the state. As the impacts of COVID-19 continue, New Jersey must continue to lead through action by addressing food insecurity, a crucial determinant of health, through diverse and widespread strategies. This is necessary to create equitable opportunity for good health and a “Culture of Health” for all in New Jersey.

In response to the significance of the issue of food insecurity and the opportunity costs of not comprehensively addressing it, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) and the Food Research & Action Center (FRAC) embarked on an *Assessment*

*of the Landscape of Hunger and Its Solutions in New Jersey*. The aim of this statewide assessment of New Jersey’s existing food access and hunger landscape is to inform state and local policymakers, state agency leaders, community and nonprofit groups, philanthropic organizations, leaders in the private sector, and community members about which policies, systems changes, cross-sector outreach, and programmatic initiatives, if implemented in the coming years, would result in the most significant gains in food security.

Now is the time for state and local policymakers, state agency leaders, community and nonprofit groups, philanthropic organizations, leaders in the private sector, and others to collaborate, break out of our silos, and collectively invest in addressing food insecurity. In this report, we outline policies, systems changes, cross-sector outreach, and programmatic initiatives to help reduce food insecurity and support good nutrition and health equity during and beyond the public health emergency. We urge stakeholders to come together to advance the recommendations.

This assessment builds on the core strengths of RWJF’s history of addressing food insecurity and health equity in New Jersey and advances the RWJF report, *Building a Culture of Health: A Policy Roadmap to Help All New Jerseyans Live Their Healthiest Lives*, priority to “expand equitable access to healthy food in communities and schools.” In addition, this project is coordinated with a preexisting RWJF-funded landscape analysis of New Jersey’s Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, previously called food stamps), which elicited feedback from existing SNAP customers and a diverse group of SNAP stakeholders. The *SNAP Project report* was released by *Hunger Free New Jersey* in May 2021. Likewise, this report is coordinated with a concurrent RWJF-funded project conducted by The Food Trust that completed a scan of community development centered around healthy food access, *Community Development and Healthy Food Access in New Jersey*.

This assessment strives to reflect the needs, priorities, and input of the community members most impacted by



food insecurity. This helps foster a racially just and equity-focused approach. Accordingly, it actively elicited input for this report from diverse stakeholders across the food system sectors, including residents with lived expertise with hunger and poverty. The initiative also engaged stakeholders through key informant meetings, focus groups, and a series of work group convenings.

The Advisory Work Group consisted of leaders across the food system sectors. The purpose of the Advisory Work Group was to provide an opportunity for dialogue and to uncover synergies to help advance collective efforts on the programs and policies that support food security, good nutrition, and health and racial equity in New Jersey. The Advisory Work Group convened for three online meetings. In the third meeting, Advisory Work Group members scored sample recommendations on a set of [assessment criteria](#). The results of the assessment activity and members' feedback further modified the recommendations presented in this report.

Stakeholder engagement, data analysis, and policy evaluations bolstered the known reality that food insecurity is a pervasive and multidimensional issue in New Jersey that requires creative solutions across sectors and across levels of influence. To better conceptualize the range of best practices and initiatives to address food insecurity in New Jersey that were generated from stakeholder input and the evidence-based literature, the recommendations are organized into three major goals with three levels of intervention—outreach and coordination, policy and systems, and place-based initiatives. Recommendations within the framework have implications for stakeholders across food system sectors.

**The three major recommendation themes are:**

- 1. enhance cross-sector coordination and expand community outreach using client-centered communication channels to improve access, awareness, and referrals to food security resources;**

- 2. maximize equitable food purchasing power and procurement systems and support community development to help address root causes of hunger; and**
- 3. build infrastructure and capacity necessary to leverage current and emerging policy and program opportunities among community organizations and governmental agencies, especially among entities most under-resourced and traditionally marginalized.**

Using this framework as a guide, we developed the following set of recommendations that reflect the information received from stakeholder interviews, focus groups, review of existing recommendation reports, and expert input from the Advisory Work Group. Recommendations to help alleviate food insecurity exist for audiences ranging from individuals and community organizations to municipalities, local agencies, and state government. The following table provides a summary of the recommendations.

**GOAL 1: ENHANCE CROSS-SECTOR COORDINATION AND EXPAND COMMUNITY OUTREACH**

Outreach and Coordination	Policy and Systems	Place-based Initiatives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create multisector customer feedback loops.</li> <li>• Design engaging client-centered outreach campaigns.</li> <li>• Engage and empower frontline workers and other trusted messengers on making effective referrals.</li> <li>• Strengthen and expand the network of partners from a broad spectrum of sectors engaging in communications and outreach with the federal nutrition programs.</li> <li>• Promote the implementation of health care/hospital systems-based food security referrals, services, and initiatives with community-based partners.</li> <li>• Build out statewide learning collaboratives and communities of practice across the food system.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Invest in technology systems to enable cross-agency data sharing and communication.</li> <li>• Maximize state and county agency utilization of federal nutrition program options streamlining benefits access.</li> <li>• Provide capacity, expertise, and community connections to the upcoming Office of New Jersey Food Security Advocate.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Replicate and support the development of community service hubs offering holistic, wraparound services to New Jersey residents facing hardships.</li> <li>• Support, enhance, and build local cross-sector community coalitions, councils, and task forces.</li> <li>• Support and create effective locally based systems to fully inform residents of food access/food program benefits opportunities.</li> </ul>

**GOAL 2: MAXIMIZE EQUITABLE FOOD PURCHASING POWER AND PROCUREMENT SYSTEMS**

Outreach and Coordination	Policy and Systems	Place-based Initiatives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create a cross-program training and resource portal on public benefit programs and food program procurement contract (vending, food products, and food such as produce) opportunities.</li> <li>• Develop a joint New Jersey food security research agenda.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Invest in and/or develop food-focused enterprises to support local food access in federal nutrition program meal service and other public purchasing.</li> <li>• Foster local small food businesses’ startup and sustainability in underserved communities.</li> <li>• Leverage the New Jersey Food Desert Relief Program (NJ FDRP) to equitably improve food access for individuals who face transportation and delivery barriers.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create and expand the use of Double up Bucks, Produce Prescription Programs, and other nutrition incentives at local retailers and farmers markets, leveraging SNAP, P-EBT, and WIC benefits.</li> <li>• Ensure streamlined and stigma-free benefit redemption via stores or online for all SNAP and WIC clients.</li> <li>• In partnership with local governments, leverage federal funding to build food-based, community-driven, economic development enterprises.</li> </ul>

**GOAL 3: BUILD INFRASTRUCTURE NECESSARY TO LEVERAGE POLICY AND PROGRAM OPPORTUNITIES**

Outreach and Coordination	Policy and Systems	Place-based Initiatives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leverage the USDA WIC innovation funds to promote trusted messenger community organizations outreach.</li> <li>• Strengthen outreach campaigns to maximize ongoing flexibilities and expanded benefit options enacted during the pandemic.</li> <li>• Increase the public understanding and awareness that solving food insecurity is vital to the health and well-being of individuals, families, the New Jersey economy, and every local community.</li> <li>• Supplement capacity of state and local agencies and organizations to prepare strong proposals.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pursue waivers and demonstration projects that adapt certain temporary COVID-19 flexibilities and changes in services and benefits for the longer term.</li> <li>• Foster cross-sector partnerships and memorandums of understanding to enable continued remote services and benefits issuance long term.</li> <li>• Leverage American Rescue Plan Act, as well as New Jersey state food program legislation funding and momentum to advance food security.</li> <li>• Strengthen customer service in SNAP and other benefit programs at the county and local levels.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leverage American Rescue Plan or other funding and issue a request for proposals to provide innovative and trusted local organizations matching funds for USDA’s SNAP outreach funding.</li> <li>• Provide a structure and mechanism for organizations, municipalities, and residents to work together to address barriers and protocols that lead to application denials and churning out of programs.</li> </ul>

# Background

## Project Foundation

## Food Insecurity in New Jersey

## Food Systems and Food Justice Impact Food Security

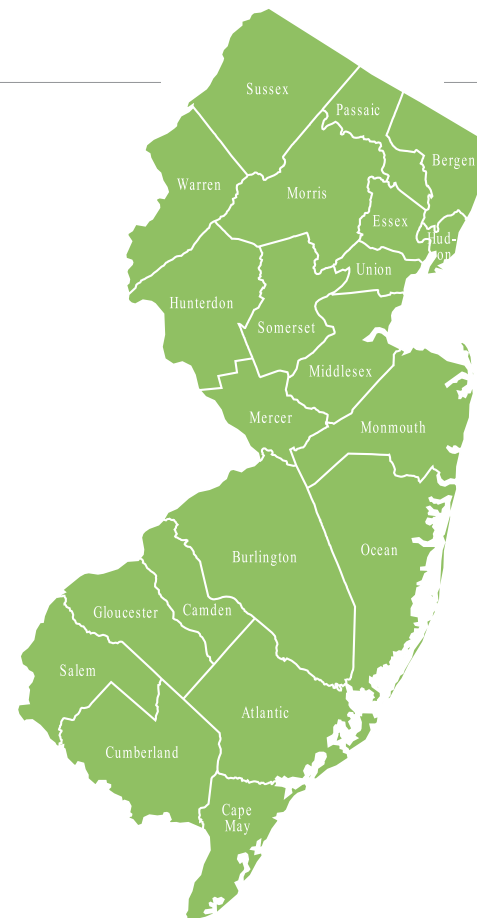
## Solutions Moving Forward

### Project Foundation

In response to the significance of the issue of food insecurity and the opportunity costs of not comprehensively addressing it, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) and the Food Research & Action Center (FRAC) embarked on an *Assessment of the Landscape of Hunger and Its Solutions in New Jersey*. The aim of this statewide assessment of New Jersey's existing food access and hunger landscape is to inform state and local policymakers, state agency leaders, community and nonprofit groups, philanthropic organizations, leaders in the private sector, and community members, about which policies, systems changes, cross-sector outreach, and programmatic initiatives, if implemented in the coming years, would result in the most significant gains in food security.

This assessment builds on the core strengths of RWJF's history of addressing food insecurity and health equity in New Jersey, including strong partnerships with leading organizations and government, support for a wide range of effective initiatives,<sup>1,2</sup> and the production of seminal reports. The RWJF report, *Building a Culture of Health: A Policy Roadmap to Help All New Jerseyans Live Their Healthiest Lives*, priority to "expand equitable access to healthy food in communities and schools" is a central organizing theme. Through inclusive and collaborative approaches, this project explored ways to fully realize the report recommendations to: (1) increase participation and strengthen benefits of the federal nutrition assistance programs; (2) close gaps in the food system; and (3) improve availability and accessibility of fresh produce and healthy foods in communities.

In addition, this assessment is coordinated with a preexisting RWJF-funded landscape analysis of New Jersey Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which elicited feedback from existing SNAP customers and a diverse group of SNAP stakeholders. The [SNAP Project report](#)<sup>3</sup> was released by [Hunger Free New Jersey](#) in May 2021. Likewise, this report is coordinated with a concurrent RWJF-funded project conducted by The Food Trust that completed a scan of healthy food-focused community development models, *Community Development and Healthy Food Access in New Jersey*.



### Food Insecurity in New Jersey

Food insecurity is a measure that indicates limited access to food due to insufficient resources to meet basic needs and indicates economic hardship within a household.<sup>4,5,6</sup> Food insecurity has serious health repercussions across the lifespan, negatively impacting the ability of children to develop and learn, as well as fueling harmful and chronic health conditions, costing New Jersey an estimated \$1.3 billion each year.<sup>7,8,9</sup> A mass of research provides evidence that food insecurity is associated with costly chronic diseases and unfavorable health outcomes, including diabetes; hypertension; poor mental health; poor birth outcomes including low birth weight; iron deficiency; cost-related medication underuse; and increased health care utilization and costs.<sup>4</sup>

Food insecurity is a significant social determinant of health that affects far too many people in New Jersey. In 2018–2020, 1 in 12 households experienced food insecurity, meaning 285,000 New Jersey households did not have reliable access to affordable, nutritious food.<sup>10</sup>

There are stark disparities in food insecurity that exist within the state, which must be addressed to create an equitable opportunity for good health for all. Community disinvestment and systems of oppression, like systemic racism, result in disproportionate burdens of food insecurity in New Jersey along geographic lines and by race and ethnicity. COVID-19 has exacerbated longstanding disparities in food insecurity and access to healthy food.<sup>11</sup> Analysis of the Census Household Pulse Survey show that in 2021, 14 percent of Black households and 18 percent of Latino households in New Jersey indicated that they sometimes or often did not have enough to eat, or “food insufficiency,” compared to 5 percent of white households (Figure 1).

Significant disparities in food insecurity also exist by geography in New Jersey. At the county level, projected 2021 food insecurity ranged from 8.2 percent in Hunterdon County to 16.2 percent in Atlantic County.<sup>12</sup> Figure 2 shows the highest rates of food insecurity are concentrated in the southern part of the state and surrounding Newark and Jersey City.

### Food Systems and Food Justice Impact Food Security

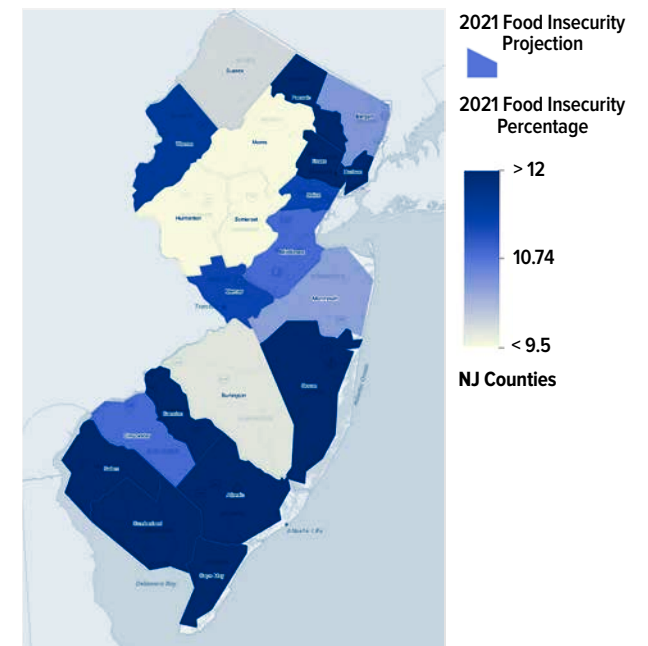
Inadequate food systems are a root cause of poor nutrition, hunger, and injustice. The food system is all the individuals, organizations, activities, and policies that play a part in growing, transporting, supplying, procuring, eating, and disposing of food.<sup>13</sup> The food system also involves elements that often go unseen, such as cultural food preferences and resource investments by individuals, communities, and local, state, and federal governments. Food systems influence nutrition and food security by determining what kinds of foods are produced and how people can access them. The sectors that are directly connected to the food system and/or engage with the food system are numerous.

The current food system is built on centuries of exploitation of people of color. Addressing oppression and inequity in the food system is vital. Food justice is communities exercising their right to grow, sell, and eat healthy food that is fresh, nutritious, affordable, culturally appropriate, and grown locally with care for the well-being of the land, workers, and animals.<sup>14</sup> Food justice promotes strong, community-powered food systems and healthy environments that democratize access to affordable, nutritious food. Food justice also expands job opportunities for historically disenfranchised people and ensures environmental sustainability.

### Solutions Moving Forward

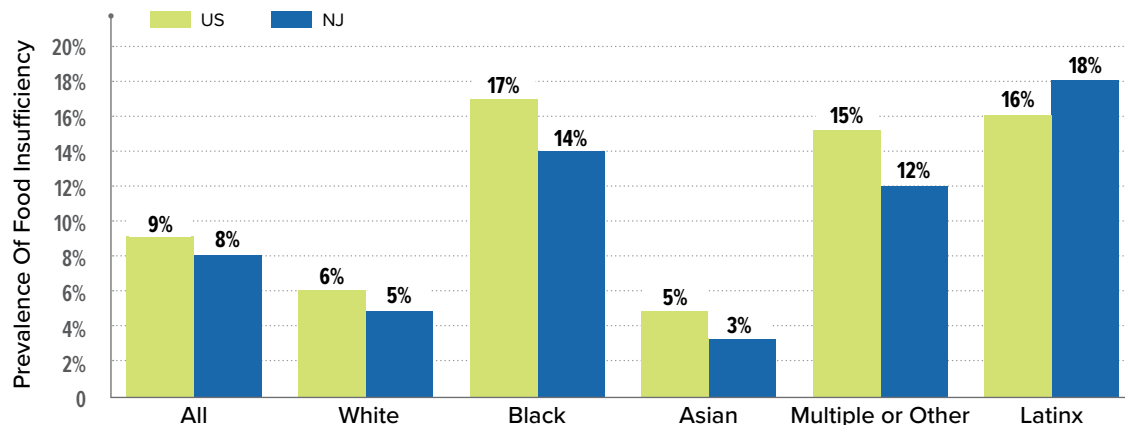
Despite the seeming ubiquity and severity of food insecurity, there are many actionable solutions to address this issue effectively and equitably, and implementing these solutions has meaningful impacts on individual health, the economy, and community resiliency. There are a multitude of exemplary existing initiatives to address hunger in New Jersey. During COVID-19, diverse community organizations pivoted to diligently address this issue, and state agencies worked to implement effective federal flexibilities that helped mitigate food insecurity. Yet, more must be done to meet unacceptable levels of poverty and hunger across the state. As the impacts of COVID-19 remain, New Jersey must continue to lead through action by addressing food insecurity, a crucial determinant of health, through diverse and widespread strategies. This is necessary to create equitable opportunity for good health and a “Culture of Health” for all in New Jersey.

**Figure 2: 2021 Projections of Overall Food Insecurity in New Jersey, by County**



Source: FRAC visualization of Feeding America’s 2021 Projected Overall Food Insecurity Rate data.

**Figure 1: 2021 Food Insufficiency in New Jersey Compared to U.S. by Race and Ethnicity**



Source: FRAC analysis of U.S. Census Bureau Household Pulse Survey Data collected in 2021. Data was combined across data collection periods “Weeks 22–40.” Household survey weights were used to generate representative estimates.

# Our Approach

## Project Goals and Objectives

## Stakeholder Engagement

## Policy and Data Analysis

## Geospatial Mapping

## Existing Initiative Asset Mapping

### Project Goals and Objectives

Working in partnership with RWJF, FRAC facilitated a statewide assessment of hunger in New Jersey to reveal the salient barriers to food security and their solutions at the programmatic, systems, and policy levels. This project engaged stakeholders from many sectors to capture lessons learned from COVID-19 and illuminate what should be carried forward. The goal of this project is to develop an intentional and coordinated cross-sector plan to help reduce food insecurity and ensure that programs and policies implemented support good nutrition and health equity during and beyond the public health emergency. The defined objectives (Figure 3) to meet this goal include:

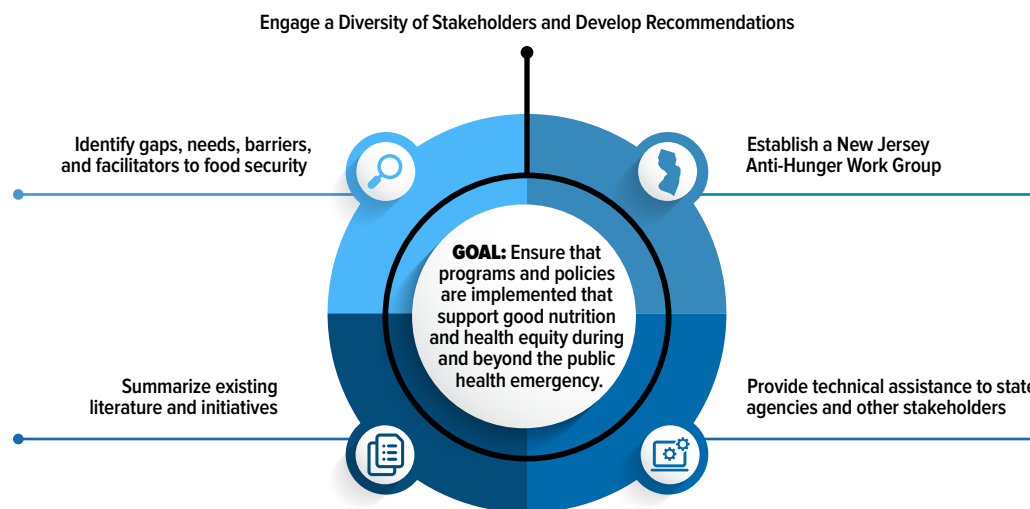
- ▶ engaging diverse stakeholders, including individuals with lived expertise with poverty and hunger, and developing recommendations;
- ▶ identifying gaps, needs, barriers, and facilitators to food security;
- ▶ summarizing existing literature and initiatives;

- ▶ establishing a New Jersey Anti-Hunger Advisory Work Group; and
- ▶ providing technical assistance to state agencies and other stakeholders.

### Stakeholder Engagement

At FRAC, we continually strive for our work to reflect the needs, priorities, and input of the community members our work impacts. This helps foster a racially just and equity-focused approach. Accordingly, we actively elicited input for this report from diverse stakeholders across the food system sectors, including residents with lived expertise with hunger and poverty (hereon referred to as *residents with lived expertise*) as well as those working in food retail, health care, emergency food assistance, transportation, academia, early care and education, anti-hunger advocacy, economic development, social services, waste management, state agencies, government, and more. We

**Figure 3:** Assessing the Landscape of Hunger and Its Solutions in New Jersey: Goal and Objectives



Source: Food Research & Action Center, Landscape Analysis of Hunger and Its Solutions in New Jersey, Funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.



engaged more than 150 stakeholders through key informant meetings, focus groups with residents with lived expertise, and a series of Advisory Work Group convenings.

The Advisory Work Group consisted of leaders across the food system sectors. The purpose of the work group was to provide an opportunity for dialogue and to uncover synergies to help advance collective efforts on the programs and policies that support food security, good nutrition, and health and racial equity in New Jersey. The Advisory Work Group convened for three online meetings. In the third meeting, work group members scored sample recommendations on a set of assessment criteria. The results of the assessment activity and members' feedback further modified the recommendations presented in this report.

## Policy and Data Analysis

### Geospatial Mapping

In addition to stakeholder engagement, we conducted primary data analysis and collected secondary data sources to produce data tools, including an interactive map dashboard that can overlay and compare and contrast measures of food hardship, food access, federal nutrition programs, and health outcomes to elucidate geographic-based assets, needs, and disparities in

resources and outcomes. Map layers in this tool include food security, infant mortality, low birth weight, as well as other contextual factors that impact the health of New Jersey residents. Users can overlay quantitative data to look for patterns that identify assets and gaps in access to resources. These overlays can be used at the state level to prioritize specific regions for funding opportunities, or by local stakeholders who can pair their understanding of local context and culture with this quantitative data to inform specific projects (e.g., co-locate services, identify targeted infrastructure investments, improve transportation routes).

### Existing Initiative Asset Mapping

In addition to geographic mapping, we conducted a scan of existing programs and initiatives to generate an asset map. New Jersey has a strong existing network of anti-hunger programs and coalitions, each with their own experts, best practices, and lessons learned. A primary goal of a statewide effort to end hunger is to leverage the skills and expertise of the individuals involved in these initiatives and increase coordination among programs. This assets-based approach aims to validate past and ongoing work and create a broad base of community and institutional involvement. This publicly accessible catalog will allow communities and institutions to make connections across topic area and place (Figure 4).



**Figure 4:** Exploring the Existing Initiative Asset Map

Learn more about food security and food access initiatives in New Jersey using the Existing Initiative Asset Map. You can search initiatives by:

Title and Description	Location	Food System Sectors Involved	Population Impacted	Level of Intervention

Source: Food Research & Action Center, *Landscape Analysis of Hunger and Its Solutions in New Jersey*. Funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

# Sectors Across the Food System Impact Food Security

Food Supply Chain

Food and Nutrition Programs

Consumers

Influencers

Cross-cutting Factors

Information and insights garnered from our stakeholder engagement, literature review, and data and policy analysis, emphasize the known reality that food insecurity is a pervasive and multidimensional issue that is impacted by every sector of the food system. Stakeholders that we

engaged identified the following sectors (Figure 5) as playing a role in food security and food access in New Jersey.

We grouped sectors into four broad categories to better organize and conceptualize the system of actors that impact New Jerseyans' food security. Categories

**Figure 5:** Sectors and Actors Impacting Food Access

<p><b>Transportation</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transportation Authorities</li> <li>• Bus and Other Public Transportation Routes</li> <li>• Sidewalks/Walkability</li> <li>• Transportation Services</li> </ul>	<p><b>Food Wholesale &amp; Retail</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supermarkets</li> <li>• Grocery and Corner Stores</li> <li>• Farmers Markets</li> <li>• Restaurants</li> <li>• Food Trucks</li> </ul>	<p><b>Food Processing, Waste, &amp; Recovery</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Food Processing Facilities, Central Kitchens</li> <li>• Food Recovery Channels</li> <li>• Waste Management Services</li> <li>• Composting Facilities</li> </ul>	<p><b>Farmers &amp; Ranchers</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Farmers</li> <li>• Ranchers</li> <li>• Home and Community Gardeners</li> </ul>
<p><b>Federal Food &amp; Nutrition Programs</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Administering State Agencies</li> <li>• Local Agency Offices</li> <li>• Program Operators</li> </ul>	<p><b>Emergency Food Assistance</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Food Banks</li> <li>• Food Pantries</li> <li>• Soup Kitchens</li> </ul>	<p><b>Nonprofits, Advocates, &amp; Philanthropy</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Anti-Hunger Advocates</li> <li>• Food Policy Committees</li> <li>• Philanthropic Food System Funders</li> </ul>	<p><b>Government</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Governor's Office</li> <li>• Food and Nutrition Legislation</li> </ul>
<p><b>Economic Development &amp; Food Financing</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFIs)</li> <li>• Healthy Food Financing</li> </ul>	<p><b>Academia</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community Colleges</li> <li>• Universities</li> <li>• Researchers</li> <li>• Cooperative Extension</li> </ul>	<p><b>Schools, Child Care, &amp; Older Adult Centers</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Schools</li> <li>• Afterschool Care Centers</li> <li>• Child Care and Older Adult Homes and Centers</li> </ul>	<p><b>Health Care &amp; Other Institutions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hospitals</li> <li>• Clinics (including mobile)</li> <li>• Produce Prescription Programs</li> </ul>

*Source: Food Research & Action Center, Landscape Analysis of Hunger and Its Solutions in New Jersey. Funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.*

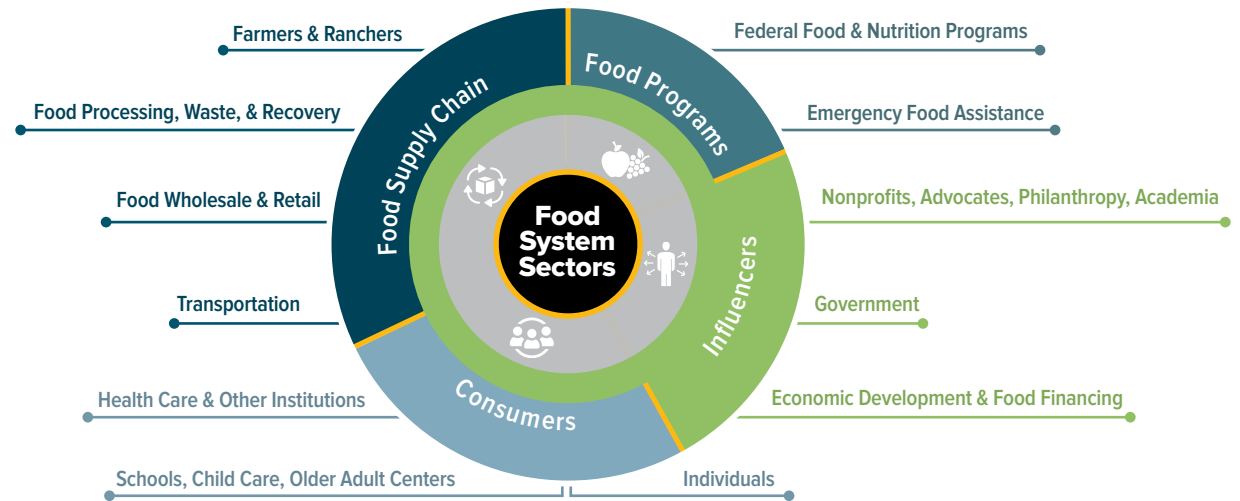


include (1) food supply chain actors, (2) food and nutrition program actors, (3) influencers, and (4) consumers (Figure 6). All sectors and categories impact food access.

There are numerous initiatives within each of these sectors that aim to address food insecurity and inadequate food access. These initiatives are coordinated and uncoordinated to varying degrees.

The following report sections describe each category of food access sectors and provide examples of their food security initiatives. It is important to note that this is not a comprehensive detailing of every food access actor or food security initiative in each sector. Select initiatives are spotlighted, and an index of existing initiatives collected through our stakeholder engagement can be found in this [static catalog](#) described in the Approach section.

**Figure 6: New Jersey Food System Sectors**



*Source: Food Research & Action Center, Landscape Analysis of Hunger and Its Solutions in New Jersey. Funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.*



**F**ood supply chain actors include all of the people and organizations that are involved in the production, processing, transportation, and sale of foods, including farmers and ranchers; food processors; food waste and recovery; wholesale outlets and retail foods outlets like supermarkets, grocery stores, and farmers markets; and transportation.

Stakeholders signaled a desire for support of local food production, processing, and procurement opportunities to improve access to local foods and support of equitable, food-focused economic development and food system workers, helping to address food insecurity at multiple levels. Innovative food supply sector initiatives recommended include:

- ▶ **Food hubs:** Food hubs are centrally located facilities with capacity to facilitate the aggregation, storage, processing, distribution, and/or marketing of locally/regionally produced food products.<sup>15</sup> By actively coordinating these activities along the value chain, food hubs expand retail markets for small to mid-sized producers, and increase access to fresh healthy food for consumers, including in underserved areas and food deserts.
- ▶ **Shared commercial kitchens:** To provide food to the public, food businesses are legally required to operate from licensed commercial kitchens per health department requirements. Many food entrepreneurs use shared commercial kitchens in lieu of owning their own facility. There are many shared [commercial kitchens in New Jersey](#), but a variety of barriers can preclude individuals and organizations from accessing them, especially small and emerging food entrepreneurs. Barriers include language barriers, cost, location, and certification requirements like ServSafe. These barriers pose equity issues as they may be more likely to impact immigrants, those with low incomes, and emerging food entrepreneurs from underserved communities. These barriers must be addressed to maximize shared commercial kitchens' ability to promote equitable food access and opportunity. In some cases, New Jersey's new [cottage food operator permit](#) helps circumvent the need to access a central kitchen, but barriers like an application fee undercut its impact.



▶ **Cooperative, value-based food purchasing models:**

At the local level, cooperative food purchasing is a model that allows a group of buyers to leverage their collective purchasing power to meet minimum purchasing requirements, split transportation costs, and negotiate a favorable price on products and services. This model was recommended for organizations that have relatively small food purchasing orders, like child care homes and centers, but could be useful for a wide variety of organizations like emergency food assistance providers and small food retailers. Purchasing across value-based, regional food systems keeps dollars in the local economy, supporting fair jobs and driving positive impact within communities.

Stakeholders also discussed the importance of adopting and incentivizing value-based procurement models to promote quality, local food procurement for resilient food systems and healthy communities. Taking into account factors other than price allows for a [true cost accounting of food](#) so that institutions requiring bidding processes don't always have to go with the cheapest offer and instead may choose the offer that provides the most value to their institution and surrounding community. Strong procurement contract language paired with state and federal policy gives school districts and other institutions the opportunity to shift their purchasing power to deepen investment in local agriculture.

**SPOTLIGHT**

**Elijah's Promise Central Kitchen**

[Elijah's Promise](#), located in New Brunswick, New Jersey, is a community kitchen that provides hot meals, job training, [community garden programming](#), [social service assistance](#), community-focused nutrition classes, social enterprise food businesses, and community food systems advocacy. They provide job training and education programs to the clients they serve and rent their teaching kitchen to local food businesses that focus on serving populations that experience food insecurity and have low incomes.

Before and during COVID-19, food supply sectors adapted to provide foods in ways that meet customers' needs and preferences. These include mobile food markets and online shopping options. Food supply sectors also interface with federal nutrition programs by providing food and monetary support to emergency food providers and helping to connect their customers to food assistance programs, like SNAP. Food retail stakeholders indicated that retailers would benefit from increased information on nutrition program benefit changes, education on federal nutrition benefit cards and vouchers, and benefit issuance dates so they can be prepared to be fully stocked and staffed. There is a gap for farmers markets and other small retailers to easily access technology, training, and equipment required to accept SNAP, WIC, nutrition incentives, and other benefits.

**SPOTLIGHT**
**SNAP Online Purchasing Pilot**

In spring 2020 New Jersey launched the option for online SNAP purchases from some food retailers to accept SNAP benefits online.<sup>16</sup> Grocery retailers responded quickly during COVID-19 to implement online shopping for SNAP and P-EBT. Some of the \$25 million in federal funding made available to USDA in the American Rescue Plan Act enacted in March 2021 went to support efforts for greater online SNAP EBT operations, as well as mobile technology to increase the number of retailers who could participate. At retailers that do not offer online purchasing but have online ordering, SNAP, P-EBT, and WIC participants are still able to utilize online options like Pay at Pick-up also known as "Click and Collect." Using this option, participants can shop online and then pay for and pick up their purchase using their EBT card or benefit vouchers.

**SPOTLIGHT**
**City Green's Garden State Good Food Network GusNIP Grant**

In 2021, City Green was awarded the first Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program (GusNIP) grant in New Jersey to support their nutrition incentive program, Garden State Good Food Network (GSGFN) Good Food Bucks. City Green grows and distributes food to their local community through a network of farmers markets and deliveries via the "Veggie Mobile," a refrigerated box truck and mobile market that transports produce across New Jersey to locations where it might otherwise be inaccessible. For every \$1 in nutrition benefits that SNAP and WIC participants use to purchase local foods at participating markets, GSGFN provides an additional \$1 in Good Food Bucks for more locally grown produce. With their GusNIP funding, City Green plans to expand their network from 24 to 40 fresh produce retailers and will be incorporating grocery stores into the incentive program.



## Federal Nutrition Programs

The federal nutrition programs—upstream approaches to help reduce and prevent food insecurity—include the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP); Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC); School Breakfast Program (SBP); National School Lunch Program (NSLP); Summer Nutrition Programs; Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP); Afterschool Meal Program; Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT); Home-delivered Meals and Congregate Senior Nutrition Programs; Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP); and SNAP Education (SNAP-Ed). For descriptions of these federal nutrition programs, including who they serve and who administers the program in New Jersey, view this [Glossary of Terms](#).

These federal nutrition programs are linked to a wide range of positive outcomes. Federal nutrition programs improve dietary intake and nutrition quality; support healthy growth of children; boost learning and academic achievement; reduce poverty and increase family economic security; lower health care spending; and enhance food retail environments.<sup>17,18,19,20</sup> The federal nutrition programs are an important source of support in New Jersey. However, there are gaps in program coverage. More must be done to increase participation and strengthen the federal nutrition programs in New Jersey. In New Jersey, reasonable enhancements to the federal nutrition programs have the potential to significantly reduce food insecurity and infuse millions of dollars into New Jersey local economies each year. The positive impacts of federal nutrition program benefits spread quickly. As families with low incomes pay for food locally at grocery stores, farmers markets, and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) Programs, they support many aspects of the food chain, from farmers and food producers to long haul truck drivers, food retailers, and store employees.<sup>21</sup> Nutrition benefits also make a difference for state and local budgets.<sup>22</sup> When New Jersey residents use federal nutrition program benefits to pay for food, they can use other resources to pay for non-food basics that often are subject to sales tax. Generated revenue can in turn be invested in the community's health.



## Federal Nutrition Program Participation in New Jersey



### SNAP<sup>26,27,28</sup>

- » **81 percent of eligible persons** participated in SNAP (2018).
- » New Jersey ranked **28th** out of all states and the District of Columbia.
- » SNAP served an average of **700,500 participants** each month (federal fiscal year [FFY] 2020).
- » SNAP, SNAP Emergency Allotments, and P-EBT benefit redemption infused **\$2.6 billion** into New Jersey (FFY 2021).



### National School Lunch Program<sup>31</sup>

- » **20,059 students** with low-income participated in the NSLP (September–February of 2019–2020 school year).
- » Generated **\$253 million in federal funding** provided to New Jersey (FFY 2021).



### Summer Meals

- » **203,000 students** participated in Summer Meals (July 2020).
- » Summer Meals served **51 percent of students** who received free or reduced-price school lunch during the academic year.



### P-EBT<sup>33</sup>

- » P-EBT provided New Jersey families **\$965 million** (\$305 in FFY 2020, \$660 in FFY 2021) to offset costs of missed meals at school and in child care.



### Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP)

- » CSFP served an average of **6,906 older adults** each month (FFY 2021).
- » Generated **\$580,000 in funding** provided to New Jersey.



### WIC<sup>29,30</sup>

- » **58.1 percent** of eligible persons participated in WIC (2019).
  - **95 percent of eligible infants** participated in WIC.
  - **47 percent of eligible children** participated.
- New Jersey ranked **21st** out of all states and the District of Columbia.
- » WIC served an average of **141,700 participants** each month (FFY 2021).
- » WIC benefit redemption infused **\$84.5 million** into New Jersey (FFY 2021).



### School Breakfast Program (SBP)<sup>32</sup>

- » **243,000 students** with low-income participated in the SBP (September–February of 2019–2020 school year).
- » SBP served **57.8 percent of students** who received free or reduced-price school lunch.
  - New Jersey ranked **25th** out of all states and the District of Columbia.
- » Generated **\$137 million in federal funding** provided to New Jersey (FFY 2021).



### CACFP

- » CACFP served an average of **70,000 children** each working day (FFY 2021).
- » CACFP provided **30 million healthy meals** and snacks (FFY 2021).
- » CACFP reimbursements infused **\$62 million** into New Jersey (FFY 2021).



### Afterschool Meal Program

- » **13,000 students** participated in Afterschool Meals (October 2020).
- » Afterschool Meals served **3 percent of students** who received free or reduced-price school lunch during the academic year.
  - New Jersey ranked **27th** out of all states and the District of Columbia.



### Home-delivered Meals and Congregate Senior Nutrition Programs

- » Congregate Senior Nutrition Programs served an average of **26,600 older adults** each month (2019).
- » Home-delivered meals programs served an average of **19,500 persons** each month (2019).
- » **4.6 million healthy meals** were served to seniors and persons with disabilities (2019).

The food environment impacts the effectiveness of the federal nutrition programs, and likewise, the food programs impact food systems. For example, it is well documented that food retail outlets that accept WIC have healthier food options than similar outlets that do not.<sup>23</sup> Federal nutrition programs also increase the purchasing power of communities. This increased purchasing power has been shown to incentivize convenience stores to become SNAP-authorized and presents an opportunity to partner with larger grocery stores to expand into these communities.<sup>24</sup> Flexibilities or incentives for local food procurement in the federal nutrition programs provide new market channels for small and medium food producers.<sup>25</sup>

For additional information on the state of federal nutrition programs in New Jersey, view the complementary brief to this report, *Hunger and Its Solutions in New Jersey: Landscape of the Federal Nutrition Programs*.

**Federal Nutrition Programs During COVID-19**

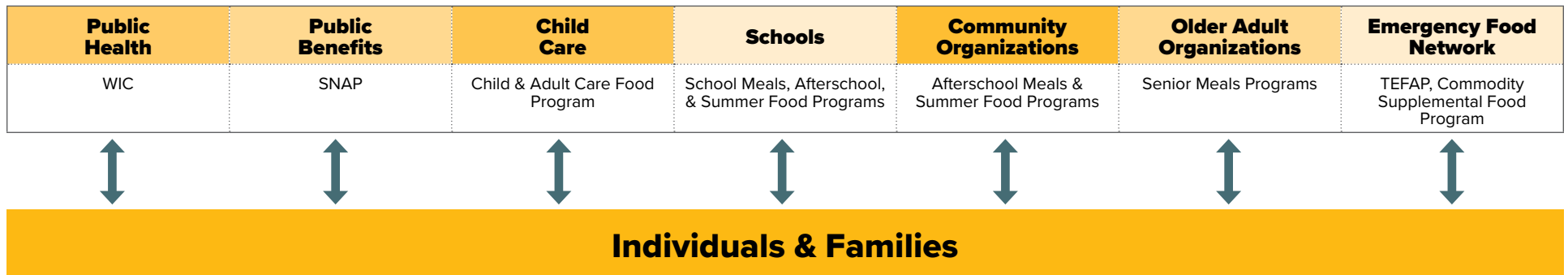
During COVID-19, New Jersey federal nutrition program administrators pursued and received many federal waivers. Flexibilities that these waivers provided were vital to ensure programs could continue to provide benefits and serve meals to New Jersey households while keeping families and providers safe through

social distancing. Nutrition program administrators and operators, including schools, youth serving programs, child care providers, county social service staff, and local agency clinic staff quickly shifted to implement waivers and meet increased demand.

New Jersey SNAP received waivers to (1) extend certification periods and waive periodic reporting requirements of income or other changes between recertifications; (2) eliminate interviews before being approved for SNAP; (3) allow telephonic signatures on applications; and (4) increase monthly benefit amounts by leveraging the COVID-19 SNAP Emergency Allotments (EAs), among others.<sup>34</sup> The New Jersey WIC acted quickly during COVID-19 to implement federal flexibilities that have allowed WIC to offer appointments over the phone, issue benefits remotely, and offer flexibilities in the WIC shopping experience like substitutions for unavailable food products. In the child nutrition programs, flexibilities provided by the waivers have made it possible for meals to be served safely during the pandemic, including allowing meals to be taken home, for parents or guardians to pick up meals for their children, and for multiple days' worth of meals to be distributed at one time. Waivers have also allowed schools to offer meals at no charge to all children while also reducing the administrative burden on school nutrition departments.



**Figure 7: Sectors and Settings Where Individuals and Families Access Federal Nutrition Programs**





## Emergency Food Assistance

New Jersey's emergency food assistance sector includes food banks like the [Community FoodBank of New Jersey](#), [Food Bank of South Jersey](#), [Fulfill](#), their programs, and their networks of food pantries, mobile pantries, and other distribution sites throughout the state. Emergency food assistance providers directly serve members of the community to help meet their immediate needs. This sector recognizes the relationship between food insecurity and other basic needs insecurity and therefore often offers other basic needs items and referrals.

### Emergency Food Assistance During COVID-19

The emergency food assistance sector has been innovative and committed in their efforts to meet the surge in need during COVID-19. Philanthropy, private donations, and food industry donations support this significant effort. In addition, federal, state, federal TEFAP commodities, as well as the creation of a short-term federal [Farmer to Families Food Box program](#) supported the food sharing effort.

From interviews with emergency food assistance stakeholders, we learned that this sector appreciates the importance of addressing immediate food access needs but recognizes the need to reduce and prevent food insecurity with sustainable approaches like the federal nutrition programs, employment training, referrals and application assistance to social services, housing assistance, and economic development, which help address root causes of hunger. Emergency food assistance providers are building their capacity to address food insecurity with policy and systems level interventions to ultimately shorten and eliminate the emergency food assistance line.

The emergency food assistance sector is also invested in promoting good nutrition and health. Emergency food assistance providers are taking steps to improve the availability and variety of fresh produce and foods through [community garden projects](#); [grow towers](#); [SNAP-Ed policy, systems, and environmental \(PSE\) changes](#); and other local, healthy food initiatives. Additionally, there are new and emerging opportunities for emergency food providers to

#### SPOTLIGHT

### Community Food Bank of New Jersey Food Service Training Academy

The Community Food Bank of New Jersey offers a 14-week intensive culinary and life skills program that provides students with the communication, nutrition, and cooking skills needed for success in the culinary arts. The [Food Service Training Academy](#) was established in 2000 and has reached more than 2,500 students. The program also helps graduates with job placement and has achieved over a 90 percent placement rate.

#### SPOTLIGHT

### Fulfill Referrals to Public Resources

Fulfill's Resource Connections Team helps community members apply for nutrition benefits through their [SNAP Enrollment Assistance](#) service. Certified [health care navigators](#) are also available to help uninsured individuals and families apply for insurance that meets their needs. Fulfill's Benefits Bus allows staff to provide these services in multiple locations, meeting the community where it is most convenient for them.

access fresh, local produce, like the [Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement Program](#). The success of this program depends on capacity of the implementing state agency to coordinate local food suppliers and vendors and to apply for and distribute food.

Through [The Emergency Food Assistance Program \(TEFAP\)](#), USDA purchases a variety of nutritious, high-quality USDA foods, and makes those foods available to the state distributing agency, the New Jersey Department of Agriculture (NJDA). NJDA then provides the food to local agencies that they have selected, usually food banks, which in turn distribute the food to local distribution agencies, such as soup kitchens and food pantries that directly serve the public.<sup>37</sup> Six state-contracted food banks and their network of over 800 local distribution agencies receive food through TEFAP in New Jersey.<sup>38</sup> Currently, New Jersey distributes over 20 million pounds of TEFAP foods annually.

#### SPOTLIGHT

### Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement Program

The USDA Agricultural Marketing Service is establishing the [Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement Program \(LFPA\)](#).<sup>35</sup> The purpose of this program is to increase local food consumption and help build and expand economic opportunity for local and socially disadvantaged producers. The program will award up to \$9.7 million to New Jersey<sup>36</sup> to procure and distribute local and regional foods that are healthy and nutritious to help meet the needs of the community. Foods can be distributed through entities including food banks, schools, and other organizations that reach underserved communities. This innovative initiative helps to address communities' immediate food access needs while also supporting small businesses and local food systems for long-term food system resiliency.



Consumer sectors of the food system include health care and other institutions, schools, child care, and older adult care centers, and individuals, including residents with lived expertise with hunger and poverty.

## Health Care

A growing number of health care systems and individual providers have recognized their multiple roles in identifying and addressing food insecurity in the health care setting and their communities. A few health care sector initiatives happening and/or discussed by the stakeholders we engaged follow.

**Screen and intervene for food insecurity in the clinical setting:** Health professionals are important sources of referrals to nutrition supports. Health professionals should be informed about programs available in their communities and should also be active partners in referring families to the programs. Health care providers can use the [Hunger Vital Sign](#) two-question screening tool to identify families as being at risk for food insecurity. FRAC's [Screen and Intervene Toolkits for Pediatricians](#) as well as the [WIC Guide for Health Care Providers](#) help providers screen for food insecurity and direct patients to resources.

### SPOTLIGHT

#### RWJBarnabas Health Beyond the Hospital

[Health Beyond the Hospital \(HBH\)](#) screens every patient for multiple social determinants of health, refers them to community resources, and follows up with ongoing support. Social determinants screened for include food security, access to housing, educational opportunities, smoking and substance use, transportation, and other social and environmental factors. HBH includes training for providers for culturally appropriate communication with patients during screening; tailored program referrals to patients that account for their age, gender, eligibility, location, languages spoken, and insurance coverage; monitoring referral outcomes; and follow-up as needed.



**Produce prescriptions:** Produce prescription projects (PPP) currently exist in New Jersey, like the partnership between Roots to Prevention and Virtual Health’s Fruit and Vegetable Prescription Program. There is an opportunity to strengthen these programs by leveraging additional funding and support of the [Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentives Program \(GusNIP\)](#). GusNIP has three types of grants: Nutrition Incentives, PP, and Cooperative Agreements. New Jersey has never been awarded a GusNIP PPP grant (although other states provide GusNIP-supported PPP services in New Jersey). In PPPs, health care providers prescribe fruits and vegetables to patients who are experiencing food insecurity and/or dealing with a diet-related chronic illness. Produce prescriptions are often redeemed at local farmers markets and grocery stores.

#### SPOTLIGHT

### The Food Trust Veggie Rx Produce Prescription Project

The Food Trust administers [Food Bucks Rx](#), a produce prescription project that operates in Philadelphia and Camden, New Jersey. The Food Trust connects health care partners with fresh food retailers to increase access to affordable fresh produce. The program provides eligible residents, usually those participating in SNAP, with “prescriptions” that can be redeemed at participating corner stores, farmers markets, and supermarkets for fresh produce. This makes fresh produce more accessible to SNAP customers and helps to support local farmers and local businesses.

**Community-based social resource database and referral initiatives:** Health care systems are increasingly supporting their patients’ access to care for social determinants of health. This more wholistically supports patients’ health and can reduce health care costs. Patients are actively referred to social services that meet their needs. Oftentimes the institutions implementing these initiatives use an evolving database of social programs searchable by geography to find and refer patients to, like the [RWJBarnabas Connect2Help](#) platform.

#### SPOTLIGHT

### Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield Neighbors in Health Program

The [Horizon Neighbors in Health Program](#) is a partnership between the Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield NJ and multiple hospitals and doctors across New Jersey with the goal to address social determinants of health barriers that impact social, emotional, and physical health. The program matches NJ residents with local community health workers and a personal health assistant to actively connect residents to the services they need, including access to healthy foods, transportation, child care, employment, and housing. In the program’s [2020 Progress Report](#), food access was the third most frequently identified priority need for clients. The initiative utilizes [NowPow](#), a digital platform on a tablet, to connect program members in need of health and community services to local organizations that deliver those services and track the referrals.



#### Health care interface with federal nutrition programs:

The health care sector can further promote food security by directly interfacing and sharing data with federal nutrition programs to streamline eligibility determination and ease participant burden. Medicaid offices can provide data to other state agencies to promote direct certification for nutrition benefits such as free and reduced-price school meals, SNAP, and WIC. Medicaid direct certification for free and reduced-price school meals is a relatively new option through the [Medicaid Direct Certification Demonstration Project](#). New Jersey did not participate in the first two rounds of the Demonstration Project but [can apply to USDA](#) by September 30, 2022, for the third round.

The interface between health care settings and WIC is particularly important because WIC requires anthropometric and biochemical tests for anemia for participants to enroll and recertify in the WIC program. To reduce duplicative testing, minimize participant burden, and ensure continued remote access to WIC, health care clinics and WIC should collaborate and share information. [USDA supports](#) this practice. Training on these policies and procedures for local

#### SPOTLIGHT

### Data Sharing Between the Health Care Sector and WIC

Sharing nutritional assessment data will limit the number of times WIC participants must go through height and weight measurements, and blood tests for anemia. Facilitating WIC’s access to relevant primary care services for nutritional and health data can be accomplished by (1) a digital information-sharing agreement (with a patient confidentiality waiver), which allows programs to share data electronically (e.g., send it electronically, create a WIC-accessible location for the data, or establish joint access to records); and/or (2) give a copy of the results to the patient. WIC can further reduce participant burden by allowing nutrition counseling provided as part of primary care services to count as WIC nutrition education.

agencies is vital to ensure congruent application of state options across counties. Inadequate data systems and limited capacity of state and local WIC agencies are barriers to WIC and health care settings sharing data.

## Schools and Child Care

Schools and child care facilities provide essential services for care and education, but they are also a vital resource for nutrition and food security. In addition to directly providing food to children through the federal nutrition programs, these institutions have direct lines of communication to children and their families, making them a trusted messenger that should be leveraged in outreach on nutrition resources.

Through farm to school and farm to early care and education activities—gardening, education, and local food procurement, these institutions have an opportunity to shape the food system and students’ access to healthy, local foods, especially by leveraging their immense purchasing power to support local agriculture. The New Jersey Department of Agriculture’s Farm to School Program efforts were launched in 2008 through a statewide collaboration of diverse partners. Farm to school activities range from school garden education that connects to the classroom, school visits to local farms, and taste tests using locally grown New Jersey produce.<sup>39</sup>

### SPOTLIGHT

#### The Common Market

The Common Market connects institutions with local foods from over 200 producers in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia. Institutions include early child care facilities, colleges and universities, hospitals, private and public schools, restaurants, retailers, and workplaces. During COVID-19, Newark Public Schools, Bridgeton Public Schools, Penns Grove School District, and Camden Promise Charter Schools used funds from the federal Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program to partner with The Common Market to provide families with access to fresh, healthy fruits and vegetables. This creative approach translated to consistent distributions of The Common Market’s Farm-Fresh Boxes, each containing 7–8 fresh produce items, an equivalent to a week’s worth of meals, all sourced from a network of sustainable family farms.

### SPOTLIGHT

#### Isles, Inc. Farm to School Grant

Isles, Inc., based in Trenton, is a community development and environmental organization. They received a Fiscal Year 2019 Farm to School Grant to work with the Trenton Public School District and additional community partners to build school garden education, nutrition education, and produce taste tests with the goal of increasing consumption of and preference for fruits and vegetables. Isles also provided support for the implementation of key nutrition components of the school district’s wellness policy and helped increase the amount of local foods purchased by the school district.



## Residents with Lived Expertise with Hunger and Poverty

All food security and food access initiatives should meaningfully engage New Jersey residents in developing hunger solutions for their neighborhoods. In the context of the federal nutrition programs, it is crucial to foster dialogue around program strengths and opportunities for improvement from the perspectives of the diversity of current and past participants, as well as those who have been eligible for programs but never participated. Their expertise should be used to inform why disparities in enrollment or outcomes exist and how to improve policies and procedures. To do so, outreach tools should engage participants in a way that is authentic, values their expertise, and is minimally intrusive.

### SPOTLIGHT

#### New Brunswick Community Food Alliance

The New Brunswick Community Food Alliance (NBCFA) is an alliance of community members and organizational leaders working together to make the food system equitable for everyone. The alliance is structured around five workgroups that meet regularly to discuss moving collective work forward. In the meetings, community members also often share a meal. This model is exemplary in engaging residents with lived expertise and has fostered a pathway for all community members to join the conversation. NBCFA is a leading example of inclusivity—their entire website and materials are available in both English and Spanish.

All sectors of the food system influence food access and food security; however, this report section will focus on the ways in which New Jersey nonprofits, advocates, philanthropy, academia, government, and economic development and food financing institutions impact food access and food security across the state.

During COVID-19, the issues of food insecurity and limited food access were laid bare. As a result, food security has become a new focus for more and more stakeholders. Stakeholders indicate that there is an opportunity to leverage disruptions caused by the pandemic as an opportunity to strategically improve food access systems in the long term.




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*“There is a tremendous willingness to do something. The most dangerous thing is to do something quickly and not comprehensively. There is a rush to do something good, but less of a rush to slow down and make a good change. There is opportunity to organize the masses when they don’t want to be organized and coordinate services that don’t want to be coordinated.”*

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– Stakeholder interviewee

## Nonprofits, Advocates, and Academia

There are a multitude of effective nonprofit organizations, academic institutions, and advocates working in New Jersey to promote equitable food systems and support food security. These organizations are essential in researching, planning, implementing, and evaluating food security initiatives. In our interviews, stakeholders emphasized that there is a need and an opportunity to support existing and additional local, regional, and statewide efforts for cross-sector coordination through capacity, coalition and learning collaborative building. Cross-sector coalitions and learning collaboratives are important to help ensure nutrition programs are not operating in silos and opportunities for synergy are being maximized. New Jersey has a range of developing and established local and statewide cross-sector coordination efforts including community coalitions, food councils, and food security task forces.<sup>40</sup>

### SPOTLIGHT

#### Hunger Free New Jersey, NJ Food for Thought Campaign

Hunger Free New Jersey’s [NJ Food for Thought \(NJFFT\) Campaign](#) brought together a broad-based group of stakeholders focused on improving access to and increasing participation in federal child nutrition programs. NJFFT coalition members include statewide education partners, advocates, government agencies, and more. The campaign facilitated multiple wins addressing childhood hunger.

### SPOTLIGHT

#### Food Democracy Collaborative, State of the Food System Symposium

In December 2021, the [NJ Food Democracy Collaborative](#) hosted the first [New Jersey State of the Food System Symposium](#), which brought together diverse stakeholders working in New Jersey’s food access and agriculture space to learn about shared and interconnected food system challenges.

### SPOTLIGHT

#### Camden Food Security Collective

The Camden Coalition of Healthcare Providers and Food Bank of South Jersey launched the [Camden Food Security Collective](#), which brings together stakeholders including community residents, health systems, and public agencies, to establish and implement a common food security agenda and plan.

### SPOTLIGHT

#### Rutgers Cooperative Extension, Department of Family and Community Health Sciences

The Department of Family and Community Health Sciences, a part of Rutgers Cooperative Extension, promotes health and wellness through education, research, and collaboration, and supporting food policy councils and community work.

## State and Local Government Policy and Initiatives

New Jersey exhibits a strong political commitment to addressing hunger. Over time, the state legislature has passed a robust set of laws aiming to combat food insecurity and promote food access across New Jersey. A recently passed law established an Office of the Food Security Advocate. Stakeholders offered recommendations, which are included in this report, around supporting the new office to better be able to take action relatively quickly. In addition, recent laws provide a state supplement for the federal Summer Food Service Program and “breakfast after the bell” meals.

### SPOTLIGHT

#### New Jersey Economic Development Authority Food Desert Initiative

The Food Desert Relief Act was signed into law by Governor Murphy in January 2021. The Food Desert Relief Program funds initiatives to increase access to nutritious foods in underserved communities. The NJEDA will provide up to \$40 million per year in tax credits, loans, grants, and/or technical assistance to supermarkets, grocery stores, and other entities to support food security.

In addition to state legislation and initiatives, local governments are using their resources to fund and implement initiatives that combat hunger in their communities. Local initiatives are vital to meaningfully addressing the specific needs of each community.

## Philanthropic and Community Development Investments

During COVID-19, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and other foundations in New Jersey provided support to meet the growing need. Philanthropy stakeholders identified the importance of addressing food security to support health equity during COVID-19 and the transition back to full economic recovery. Stakeholders also felt it was important for

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*“County board of commissioners can address food insecurity through the ‘power of the budget’ to allocate funding; the ‘power of convening’ to build capacity and create action; and the ‘power of authority and responsibility’ for the county government to function effectively.” — Stakeholder interviewee*

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### SPOTLIGHT

#### Bergen County Food Security Task Force

In 2020, Bergen County launched the Food Security Task Force led by Commissioner Tracy Zur and the County Executive Office along with key leadership from local nonprofits and key representatives from across the county who manage food pantries and local meal distribution efforts daily. The Task Force is charged with devising new solutions to ensure every county resident has access to healthy food options during this pandemic and afterwards. The commissioners also allocated \$2 million in CARES funding to address food insecurity.

### SPOTLIGHT

#### Nourishing Newark Community Grants Program

The City of Newark is investing \$2 million in American Rescue Act Funds into grants to support community-based organizations efforts to combat food insecurity. The Nourishing Newark Community Grants Program seeks to spur the creation and expansion of sustainable urban food systems funding urban agriculture, training and education, and community distribution of produce projects.

### SPOTLIGHT

#### New Jersey Food Access Initiative (NJFAI)

The New Jersey Food Access Initiative (NJFAI) is an innovative financing program designed to increase the supply of affordable, fresh food in underserved areas across the state, while improving the diets and health outcomes of the state’s residents and spurring economic development in low- and moderate-income communities. The NJFAI provided affordable financing to help develop new, full-service supermarkets, capital improvements of fresh departments, and additional support to prevent existing stores from closing. RWJF awarded a \$10 million Program Related Investment and a \$2 million grant to the Reinvestment Fund to start NJFAI.

food security initiatives to maximize federal resources, engage residents with lived experience in design and implementation, and include a focus on addressing root causes by building economic development and resiliency for communities.

In New Jersey, committed companies and their foundations including Campbell Soup Co. and the Campbell Soup Foundation, the Horizon Foundation of New Jersey (Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield of New Jersey), and Subaru Foundation of America, support projects in communities where they operate. There are also foundations that include a focus on specific vulnerable populations, such as older adults. The Council of New Jersey Grantmakers, Health in Aging funders affinity group, hosted a webinar/meeting for dialogue and to share their perspective and learnings with RWJF’s Assessing the Landscape of Hunger and its Solutions in New Jersey project.

New Jersey’s Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFIs) are mission-driven financial institutions that deliver affordable credit, development services, capital, and financial services to residents, nonprofits, and businesses in low-resourced and economically distressed communities. CDFIs can support technical assistance and financing businesses that provide healthy food options. New Jersey CDFIs received an additional \$6.3 million in federal funds to spur economic activity in communities “disproportionately affected” by COVID-19.

**S**takeholders identified key cross-sector assets and challenges that impact food security and food access across the state, which in turn ultimately impact client services and their outcomes.

### Coordination of Services and Data Sharing at the State and Local Levels

There are many high-quality initiatives to address food insecurity already being implemented in New Jersey; however, stakeholders consistently described the need for these programs and services to be better coordinated. Current uncoordinated responses to hunger lead to burdensome and time-consuming application processes and delays in accessing benefits. When households are required to spend so much time navigating disjointed benefit systems just to meet their immediate basic needs, it limits their ability to develop long-term solutions for their families.

A few benefits of better coordinated systems include: (1) reduced participant burden through streamlined application processes; (2) wholistic, wraparound services provided to New Jersey residents facing hardships; (3) increased automatic enrollment to federal nutrition programs; and (4) ability for programs to engage in cost-sharing models. Strategies for better systems of coordination discussed include co-locating services, improving data sharing, and supporting cross-sector coalitions or learning collaboratives.

#### DATA SHARING

COVID-19 pushed nutrition assistance programs to enhance their technology and data capacities, but lack of established data-sharing systems was a commonly cited need to address among stakeholder interviewees. Improved data systems and data sharing are needed between and across all entities—state and local agencies, health care providers, anti-hunger community organizations, and other social services organizations. During COVID-19, insufficient data systems and inadequate ability to share data across programs contributed to challenges implementing P-EBT, limited the ability of health care providers to share health data useful to WIC, and continually limit cross-program automatic eligibility

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*“The most important things we can do in policy and direct service is to coordinate them. It’s fragmented and it’s a miracle anyone gets anything when they need it.”*

— Stakeholder interviewee

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determinations and referrals. Some data capacity and sharing projects are being implemented in New Jersey, but more must be done to streamline access for residents.

Many means-tested programs have significant overlap in eligibility criteria. Despite this, individuals and families enrolled in one program might not be enrolled in another due to burdensome paperwork, lack of awareness, and misinformation. Coordination across programs is

critical because individuals often face multiple material insecurities, including income, food, housing, and healthcare. Stakeholders described a need for a single application to multiple benefits across departments to streamline families’ access to the full complement of benefits they are eligible for. Other states’ online multi-benefit application portals can serve as models for this innovation.<sup>41,42</sup> Other approaches utilize a “no wrong door” application system with a set of pathways connecting the applicant to an array of programs they may need.

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*“What we really need is multiple doors to one application—that’s real coordination.”*

— Advisory Work Group participant

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**SPOTLIGHT**

**Food and Nutrition Data Hub Project**

The Food and Nutrition Data Hub Project is directed by the New Jersey Department of Human Services' Division of Family Development (DFD). This project plans to establish a framework to facilitate electronic data exchanges between the New Jersey SNAP and WIC programs to improve nutrition support services. More specifically, New Jersey will create a system to allow SNAP, WIC, and potentially other state programs to coordinate benefits and services by increasing cross-enrollment via automated outreach content and tracking mechanisms. An online access portal also will be created for WIC professionals to confirm SNAP eligibility. By coordinating SNAP and other nutrition supports, leveraging New Jersey SNAP's existing data, the new data hub will allow DFD to match participant information across nutrition assistance programs to identify and contact individuals and households that are not receiving benefits despite being likely eligible for them. Additionally, DFD will be able to confirm participation in nutrition assistance programs through the data hub and use this information to verify eligibility for other forms of support.

**County Autonomy and Variability in Program Outreach and Services**

New Jersey's government structure results in strong decision-making power held at the county level. Likewise, many programs and services are operated on a county level in New Jersey. Stakeholders indicate that this county-level autonomy generates variable quality and quantity of nutrition program services and outreach. This can exacerbate inequities in who is accessing nutrition programs and subsequently worsen gaps in food access and food security. It also leads to confusion surrounding county agency options. School districts are even more fragmented with more districts than municipalities in the state, making the implementation of P-EBT challenging.<sup>43</sup> Stakeholders indicate that administration offices vary in what types of documentation they'll accept, flexibilities they offer, their willingness to work with community organizations, and degree of accommodation in the application process.

*“When you’re dealing with food as a necessity—to have it be subject to so much local variability and subject to a local champion that cares about service delivery, it’s damaging. The county and town you live in determines to such a huge extent the access and quality of resources.” — Stakeholder interviewee*

There are opportunities for state government and state agencies to generate and promote statewide directives for mandating and operationalizing cross-program coordination, streamlined program services, and client-friendly default options. For example, statewide directives on sharing data across programs can streamline application processes for residents and increase cross-program referrals. Likewise, statewide directives on outreach can help county agencies reach underserved populations, which is especially imperative during COVID-19.

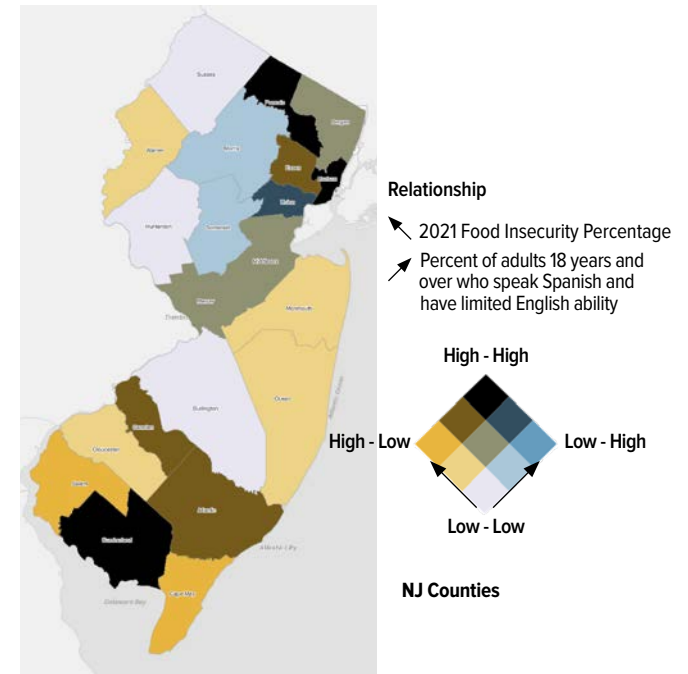
**PROGRAM OUTREACH**

New Jersey has a SNAP state outreach plan, which leverages 50/50 reimbursement funds from the federal government for projects that educate potentially eligible SNAP customers and helps them navigate the application process. Stakeholders appreciate the partnerships New Jersey has with food banks and other community organizations that are trusted messengers for such work. Stakeholders, however, reported that more robust outreach efforts are necessary given the lack of SNAP and other program awareness among residents. COVID-19 shifted the economic stability of thousands of people in New Jersey through health emergencies, job loss, restaurant sector disruptions, and school closures. Because of this, many families needed and were eligible for nutrition program benefits for the first time. They may not have known about or had experience accessing

benefits in the past. Many immigrant families refrained from applying for benefits due to the chilling effect of public charge. Robust, culturally appropriate community outreach is vital to combating misperceptions and educating those who are potentially eligible on available resources, including how to apply for nutrition benefits.

It is critically important to provide services, resources (such as websites and apps), and outreach materials in the preferred language of the participant. Comparing projected 2021 food insecurity to the proportion of adults who speak Spanish and have limited English ability (Figure 8) highlights areas that would most benefit from additional Spanish language outreach materials.

**Figure 8: 2021 Projected Food Insecurity and Spanish Speakers with Limited English Ability in New Jersey, By County**



Source: Food Research & Action Center analysis and visualization of Census Bureau's American Community Survey data on English ability and linguistic isolation and Feeding America's 2021 Projected Overall Food Insecurity Rate data.



**Capacity at State Agencies**

Government agencies that administer federal nutrition programs and food access initiatives in New Jersey are sophisticated, and they must often operate on tight budgets and with limited time and staff to carry out all mandated activities. Implementing new programs, waivers, flexibilities, and guidance during COVID-19 exacerbated the capacity challenges that state agencies are facing. Inadequate capacity can lead to poor customer service and inadequate outreach to community members as direct service staff are overwhelmed with increased demand.

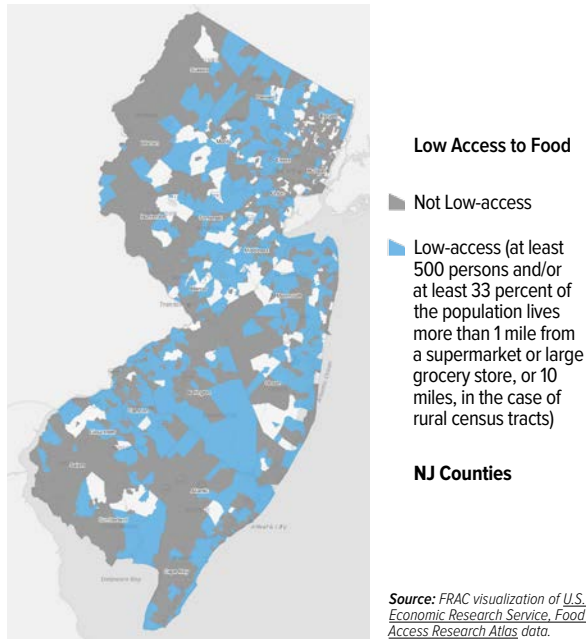
One consequence of limited state agency time and staff is their reduced capacity to write competitive applications to draw down federal funding, which can be leveraged to reduce food insecurity and promote healthy food access. Supplementing the capacity of state agencies and other organizations to prepare strong proposals for and/or maximize use of competitive and noncompetitive USDA and other federal grants has the potential to bring millions of dollars into the state and more equitably address food insecurity over the long term.

We have created a [guide to federal funding opportunities](#) that can be creatively leveraged to enhance food security and foster food-focused economic resiliency for local New Jersey communities. The guide provides evidence that New Jersey state agencies would benefit from assistance applying for and implementing federal funding opportunities.

**Food Access and Transportation**

Low physical access to food impacts a household’s food security. Focus group participants described difficulty procuring the types and quality of food they are looking for on a limited budget as a result of low access to food. Low food access can be defined as living more than 1 mile from the nearest supermarket, supercenter, or large grocery store for an urban area, or more than 10 miles for a rural area.<sup>44</sup> Looking at the neighborhood level, when at least 500 persons and/or at least 33 percent of the population lives more than 1 mile from a supermarket

**Figure 9: Low Food Access Areas in New Jersey**



or large grocery store (10 miles, in the case of rural census tracts), that area is designated as having low food access.<sup>45</sup> Figure 9 highlights areas with low food access across the state.

Strategies to counteract low access to food include improving public transportation, strengthening access to online ordering and food delivery, and supporting new food outlets to serve low-food-access areas. Each strategy has considerations that must be addressed to make them effective in enhancing food access, and a combination of strategies is necessary to meet the needs of all New Jersey residents.

**PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION TO EXISTING FOOD OUTLETS**

Reliable transportation supports residents’ access to healthy food retail options, even if there are no grocery stores in their neighborhood or city. Inadequate transportation was a commonly cited barrier to accessing food among focus group participants. Even if public transportation is available, it may not always be a viable option if it operates at too few intervals or the route to the food outlet is lengthy.





*“The bus runs every hour to hour and a half in my town and it takes almost one and a half to two hours just to get to the only ShopRite it goes to. There’s also no Walmart in that area either. On top of transporting the food you are able to get, it may spoil before you even get home.”*

— Focus group participant

#### **ONLINE ORDERING AND GROCERY DELIVERY**

Rather than transporting residents to food outlets, online ordering and food delivery can transport the food to residents’ households or a convenient nearby location. This can be an efficient way to combat low access to food. COVID-19 increased the availability and use of online ordering and food delivery. Focus group participants described challenges they face using these services, including (1) grocery delivery not being readily available in rural areas of New Jersey, (2) select online ordering website unable to accept federal nutrition program benefits and payment, and (3) unaffordable fees for grocery delivery and click and pickup options.

Additionally, 1 in 7 New Jersey households does not have broadband internet.<sup>46</sup> Internet access would need to be addressed for online ordering to become a more impactful way to address low food access.

#### **NEW FOOD OUTLETS IN AREAS WITH LOW FOOD ACCESS**

Supporting new food outlets to operate in areas designated as having low food access is another way to address this issue and eventually eliminate the designation. Focus group participants stressed that it is important for any new food outlet to accept federal nutrition program benefits.

#### **SPOTLIGHT**

#### **Fulfill Mobile Market**

Fulfill Mobile Pantries distribute food in locations that are not well served by permanent food pantries. Residents can go to these convenient sites to receive nonperishable food as well as fresh produce and baked goods. The mobile pantries operate at several low-income and other locations in Monmouth and Ocean counties.

# Recommendations for Action

## Recommendation Framework

## Recommendations Summary

### Goal 1

Outreach & Coordination  
Policy & Systems  
Place-based Initiatives

### Goal 2

Outreach & Coordination  
Policy & Systems  
Place-based Initiatives

### Goal 3

Outreach & Coordination  
Policy & Systems  
Place-based Initiatives

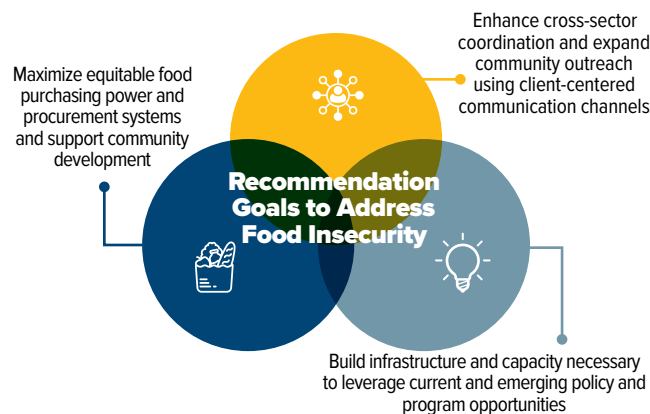
## Recommendation Framework

Our stakeholder engagement, data analysis, and policy evaluations bolstered the known reality that food insecurity is a pervasive and multidimensional issue in New Jersey that requires creative solutions across sectors and across levels of influence. To better conceptualize the range of best practices and initiatives to address food insecurity in New Jersey, we have characterized recommendations and strategies from stakeholders and the evidence-based literature into three major goals spanning three levels of intervention.

The three major recommendation goals are to:

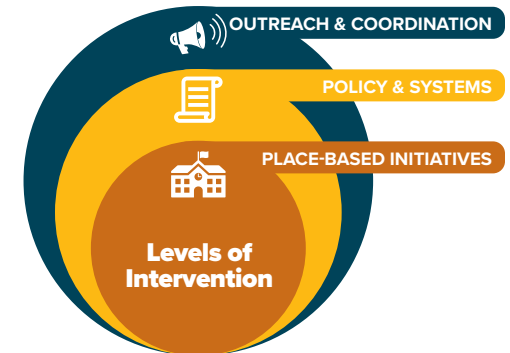
1. enhance cross-sector coordination and expand community outreach using client-centered communication channels to improve access, awareness, and referrals to food security resources;
2. maximize equitable food purchasing power and procurement systems and support community development to help address root causes of hunger; and
3. build infrastructure and capacity necessary to leverage current and emerging policy and program opportunities among community organizations and governmental agencies, especially among entities under-resourced and traditionally marginalized (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Recommendation Goals



The three levels of intervention are: outreach and coordination; policy and systems; and place-based initiatives (Figure 11).

Figure 11: Recommendation Levels of Intervention



Source: Food Research & Action Center, Landscape Analysis of Hunger and Its Solutions in New Jersey. Funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

Using this framework as a guide, we developed the following matrix of recommendations that reflect the information received from stakeholder interviews, focus groups, review of existing recommendation reports, and expert input from the Advisory Work Group. Recommendations to help alleviate food insecurity exist for audiences ranging from individuals and community organizations, to municipalities, local agencies, and state government. These recommendations for action are in line with [preexisting recommendation reports](#).

Successfully addressing hunger in New Jersey includes ensuring that implementation of the following recommendations focuses on populations impacted by food insecurity the most, including children, unemployed and underemployed adults, low wage workers, women, people with disabilities, immigrants, older adults, LGBTQ+ people, struggling veterans, returning citizens, people experiencing homelessness, and people residing in rural areas. Black, Latino, Native American, and Asian and Pacific American households have faced a long history of structural racism that has contributed to disproportionate rates of food insecurity that must be addressed head-on through equitable policies if we are to increase food security in New Jersey. It is essential to center work to address hunger on strategies that most effectively support the groups that are at the highest risk of food insecurity.

# Recommendations Summary

GOAL 1: ENHANCE CROSS-SECTOR COORDINATION AND EXPAND COMMUNITY OUTREACH		
Outreach and Coordination	Policy and Systems	Place-based Initiatives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create multisector customer feedback loops.</li> <li>• Design engaging client-centered outreach campaigns.</li> <li>• Engage and empower frontline workers and other trusted messengers on making effective referrals.</li> <li>• Strengthen and expand the network of partners from a broad spectrum of sectors engaging in communications and outreach with the federal nutrition programs.</li> <li>• Promote the implementation of health care/hospital systems-based food security referrals, services, and initiatives with community-based partners.</li> <li>• Build out statewide learning collaboratives and communities of practice across the food system.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Invest in technology systems to enable cross-agency data sharing and communication.</li> <li>• Maximize state and county agency utilization of federal nutrition program options streamlining benefits access.</li> <li>• Provide capacity, expertise, and community connections to the upcoming Office of New Jersey Food Security Advocate.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Replicate and support the development of community service hubs offering wholistic, wraparound services to New Jersey residents facing hardships.</li> <li>• Support, enhance, and build local cross-sector community coalitions, councils, and task forces.</li> <li>• Support and create effective locally based systems to fully inform residents of food access/food program benefits opportunities.</li> </ul>
GOAL 2: MAXIMIZE EQUITABLE FOOD PURCHASING POWER AND PROCUREMENT SYSTEMS		
Outreach and Coordination	Policy and Systems	Place-based Initiatives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create a cross-program training and resource portal on public benefit programs and food program procurement contract (vending, food products, and food such as produce) opportunities.</li> <li>• Develop a joint New Jersey food security research agenda.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Invest in and/or develop food-focused enterprises to support local food access in federal nutrition program meal service and other public purchasing.</li> <li>• Foster local small food businesses' startup and sustainability in underserved communities.</li> <li>• Leverage the New Jersey Food Desert Relief Program (NJ FDRP) to equitably improve food access for individuals who face transportation and delivery barriers.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create and expand the use of Double up Bucks, Produce Prescription Programs, and other nutrition incentives at local retailers and farmers markets, leveraging SNAP, P-EBT, and WIC benefits.</li> <li>• Ensure streamlined and stigma-free benefit redemption via stores or online for all SNAP and WIC clients.</li> <li>• In partnership with local governments, leverage federal funding to build food-based, community-driven, economic development enterprises.</li> </ul>
GOAL 3: BUILD INFRASTRUCTURE NECESSARY TO LEVERAGE POLICY AND PROGRAM OPPORTUNITIES		
Outreach and Coordination	Policy and Systems	Place-based Initiatives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leverage the USDA WIC innovation funds to promote trusted messenger community organizations outreach.</li> <li>• Strengthen outreach campaigns to maximize ongoing flexibilities and expanded benefit options enacted during the pandemic.</li> <li>• Increase the public understanding and awareness that solving food insecurity is vital to the health and well-being of individuals, families, the New Jersey economy, and every local community.</li> <li>• Supplement capacity of state and local agencies and organizations to prepare strong proposals.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pursue waivers and demonstration projects that adapt certain temporary COVID-19 flexibilities and changes in services and benefits for the longer term.</li> <li>• Foster cross-sector partnerships and memorandums of understanding to enable continued remote services and benefits issuance long term.</li> <li>• Leverage American Rescue Plan Act, as well as New Jersey state food program legislation funding and momentum to advance food security.</li> <li>• Strengthen customer service in SNAP and other benefit programs at the county and local levels.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leverage American Rescue Plan or other funding and issue a request for proposals to provide innovative and trusted local organizations matching funds for USDA's SNAP outreach funding.</li> <li>• Provide a structure and mechanism for organizations, municipalities, and residents to work together to address barriers and protocols that lead to application denials and churning out of programs.</li> </ul>

## Enhance cross-sector coordination and expand community outreach using client-centered communication channels to improve access, awareness, and referrals to food security resources

### OUTREACH & COORDINATION

- 1. Create multisector customer feedback loops.** Establish multisector customer feedback loops to inform the continual quality improvement of community initiatives and state and local agency and organization services and inclusion of underserved groups and individuals. The customer feedback mechanism should (1) use sustainable strategies to engage individuals with lived expertise with hunger and poverty to help improve policies; (2) expand opportunities to engage with policymakers by expanding the use of focus groups, virtual town halls, listening sessions, and office hours; (3) make the state agency planning process public and transparent, including by soliciting stakeholder comments on state plans and pilot testing new initiatives with customers with low incomes; (4) establish work groups with diverse membership; and (5) increase local agency capacity to track participation and utilization, evaluate progress, and adapt plans to improve access.
- 2. Design engaging client-centered outreach campaigns.** Design outreach campaigns that communicate effectively to all eligible populations by focusing on messaging that is positive, engaging, and empowering—honoring intended recipients’ life goals and aims. Messaging should be linguistically, culturally, and age-group appropriate. Technology is an important resource, but to reach all audiences the campaign will need to employ multiple avenues, e.g., radio, newspapers, billboards, flyers, word-of-mouth/tell-a-friend campaigns. Consider involving a graphic or visual artist to animate positive benefits with storytelling and messaging and/or a celebrity spokesperson for the ad copy, commercials, and trailers.
- 3. Engage and empower frontline workers and other trusted messengers on making effective referrals.** Engage frontline workers and provide them with tools and education to connect people to food resources

and federal nutrition programs. Such frontline workers include emergency food pantry volunteers, for example, as well as a broad array of staff and volunteers in other sectors. Offer clear, affirmative, and succinct messaging on how immigrant families can safely access programs without fear of public charge consequences. Leverage and coordinate programs and initiatives that already conduct outreach to at-risk populations, including Earned Income Tax Credit outreach programs, Medicaid, Meals on Wheels, nutrition educators, food pantries, and community garden programs to promote both local resources and the federal nutrition programs.

- 4. Strengthen and expand the network of partners from a broad spectrum of sectors engaging in communications and outreach with the federal nutrition programs.** Strengthen and expand the network of New Jersey partners from a broad spectrum of sectors, including social services, early childhood education, schools and colleges, advocacy organizations, emergency food network, faith-based and community-based organizations, health, and business, engaging in communications and outreach with the federal nutrition programs. The strategies vary in the level of commitment required and include communicating feedback on the programs; conducting food program outreach and promotion; making food program referrals; offering cross-training opportunities; co-location; and, in some cases, integrated services.
- 5. Promote the implementation of health care/hospital systems-based food security referrals, services, and initiatives with community-based partners.** Facilitate relationships between health care sector/hospital systems and community-based organizations to solicit the input of residents with lived expertise, to develop social resource databases for active referrals, and to promote implementation of referral systems, food insecurity screen and treat protocols, and produce prescription programs.

This work could include reducing policy and practice barriers including lack of a multisystem benefit portal, difficult application processes, and inability to interface or share certain types of data approved by the patient.

**MODEL: Co-locating WIC offices in hospitals. More than two-thirds of the community served by Arkansas Children’s Hospitals (ACH) qualify for Medicaid, so ACH has worked with the state’s health department to establish an onsite Women, Infants and Children (WIC) office to encourage families to apply and receive services for WIC during their hospital stay or office visits.**

- 6. Build out statewide learning collaboratives and communities of practice across the food system.** Support and leverage New Jersey’s excellent existing collaboratives, and statewide and interagency groups including those focused on issues across the food system. The New Jersey Food Security Initiative could create a statewide New Jersey Food Security Initiative group—community of practice—a convening and learning platform for representatives from sectors across the food system, including coalitions, associations, organizations, agencies, interagency committees and advisory groups, business/industry, residents, and community-based initiatives to support cross-sector collaboration and implementation of food security recommendations. This would complement and help improve the New Jersey Food Security Advocate office’s coordination of state agencies.

### POLICY & SYSTEMS

- 7. Invest in technology systems to enable cross-agency data sharing and communication** between SNAP, WIC, P-EBT, Older Adult Meal Programs, Medicaid, emergency food assistance, economic development and support programs, transportation, and other agencies. This could involve a multi-benefit portal by which residents could apply for multiple programs at

once online. Other approaches utilize a “no wrong door” application system with a set of pathways connecting the applicant to an array of programs they may need. Increase coordination between the federal nutrition programs and other social safety net programs regarding applications, outreach, and enrollment assistance. Many means-tested programs have significant overlap in eligibility criteria. Despite this, individuals and families enrolled in one program might not be enrolled in another due to burdensome paperwork, lack of awareness, and misinformation. Coordination across programs is critical because individuals often face multiple material insecurities, including income, food, housing, and health care.

**MODEL: Data sharing across emergency food purchasers.** West Side Campaign Against Hunger uses an informal data sharing and purchasing agreement model to save four emergency food organizations in three different New York City boroughs 20 percent on their food purchasing budgets. The agreement pushes distributors to charge the lowest cost across the table. By sharing purchase quantity and cost per item data, the organizations collectively bargain for streamlined transportation of goods at optimal competitive prices.

8. **Maximize state and county agency utilization of federal nutrition program options streamlining benefits access.** Clarify county agency options and capacities and promote state directives for mandating and operationalizing cross-program coordination, and implementation of program streamlining and client-friendly default options. Support county-level replication of robust best practices. Address barriers identified by county commissioners, county Boards of Social Services, and other administrators and policymakers. Focus on client-centered equitable solutions to benefits access identified by clients, community leaders, and stakeholders. Maximize positive program options within federal program rules including automatic enrollment. Support policies and programs that address root causes of food insecurity and low food access. Help to

inform and lift up the interconnectedness of important policies and programs. These include, among other things, higher education credentialing or degrees via Community College Opportunity Grant and Garden State Guarantee; job placement programs; the child tax credit; state and federal earned income tax credits; and social security enhancements.

9. **Provide capacity, expertise, and community connections to the upcoming Office of New Jersey Food Security Advocate.** Supporting the New Jersey Food Security Advocate with expertise, capacity and community connections will be essential to the success of the new office. New Jersey has a deep bench of coalitions, organizations, and individuals with the expertise, experience, and connections needed to inform and support this effort. The office can employ a number of options for ongoing communication and input.

## PLACE-BASED INITIATIVES

10. **Replicate and support the development of community service hubs offering wholistic, wraparound services to New Jersey residents facing hardships.** Create convenient, dignified, streamlined access to services through community service hubs, innovative community-level direct services (federal nutrition programs, emergency food assistance, health care, job training, child care, other public benefits enrollment) co-located in an easily accessible location, including mobile locations and in senior centers, and colleges/universities.
11. **Support, enhance, and build local cross-sector community coalitions, councils, and task forces.** Invest in community coalitions, food security taskforce, food councils, and resilience work groups, to (1) function as learning collaboratives and communities of practice, and (2) conduct local food access assessments, and develop and implement comprehensive plans to address food insecurity in their communities. Local councils, taskforces or coalitions should bring together diverse stakeholders and center the voices of residents with

lived expertise to strengthen the food system and food security. Establishing a fellowship program to support the development of racially diverse, community-based leaders in the food system can enhance representation and center the voices of residents with lived expertise into these groups. These groups can be staffed out and funded through a variety of mechanisms including philanthropy, county commissions, city councils, and community-based organizations. New Jersey has a range of established and developing local community coalitions, food councils, and food insecurity taskforces to leverage.

**MODEL: Community Quality Council (CQC).** The [Illinois Hunger Coalition](#) and Illinois Department of Human Services local offices co-convene meetings with cross-sector groups including community groups, direct service providers, food pantries, medical clinics, domestic violence shelters, and homeless advocacy organizations. Since 2004, the CQC has helped to improve services at local federal nutrition program offices and establish collaborative relationships between food access stakeholders.

**MODEL: Baltimore Resident Food Equity Advisors: A Model of Collaborative Governance for Food Systems Sustainability** is a resident-centered process to bring new knowledge and voices from residents into recommendations about the city’s food environment plans and policies. Resident Food Equity Advisors are residents selected from every district in Baltimore City to participate in a collaborative process with the Baltimore Food Policy Initiative staff to inform equitable food policy recommendations.

12. **Support and create effective locally based systems to fully inform residents of food access/food program benefits opportunities.** Engage school districts, emergency food providers, child care providers, public health, faith-based networks, food policy councils, advocates, and community groups to continuously alert their constituents to food program and food procurement options, especially constituents that are at greater risk of experiencing food insecurity.

## Maximize equitable food purchasing power and procurement systems and support community development to help address root causes of hunger

### OUTREACH & COORDINATION

**13. Create a cross-program training and resource portal on public benefit programs and food program procurement contract (vending, food products, and food such as produce) opportunities.** Create a cross-program training and resource portal for local and state agency staff, community-based organization staff, local food producers and farmers covering the range of public benefit programs and the food selling/contracts (vending, food products, and food, e.g., produce) opportunities available. This will contribute to food justice by creating connections that enhance opportunities for under-resourced and often overlooked Black, Indigenous, and immigrant farmers to secure federal nutrition program and other food contracts. In addition, it will support cross-program active referrals and joint outreach to underserved communities.

**MODEL: Training Portal.** The Minnesota Department of Agriculture makes Farmers Market Nutrition Program online training available to all social services workers. The trainings are offered at various dates and times and in multiple languages.

**14. Develop a joint New Jersey food security research agenda.** Work collaboratively across food system actors to support development of a joint New Jersey food security research agenda and provide coordinating capacity to move research forward. Community-based participatory research methods can contribute. By working collaboratively with the people who live and work locally, this project would take an asset-based approach to equitable food systems work that seeks to highlight the strengths, capacity, and knowledge of all those involved.

### Policy & Systems

**15. Invest in and/or develop regional food hubs, shared central processing facilities, shared central kitchens, purchasing and growing cooperatives, and local vending to support local food producers, small businesses,**

**and farmers, and local food access in federal nutrition program meal service and other public purchasing.** The federal nutrition program meal service brings millions of dollars into New Jersey each year. Facilitating the connection between New Jersey's local food producers and farmers and the food program operators will make the food systems models more economically feasible and sustainable, while at the same time enhancing the quality and freshness of the foods offered. Regional food hubs, shared central processing facilities, shared central kitchens, purchasing and growing cooperatives, and local vending help to facilitate this process and overcome challenges around economies of scale, processing and storage capacities, and support. Such efforts to develop New Jersey food system infrastructure and supply gaps would help support equitable access for producers in the region, especially owners of small and emerging farms in rural and urban areas and producers who are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color.

**MODEL: Food hubs partnering with local producers.** Common Market (Philadelphia, PA) partners with farmer and grower networks to manage the aggregation and distribution of local food to improve food security and farm viability. The organization focuses on local food distribution to anchor institutions: hospitals, schools, restaurants, colleges and universities, community organizations, corporate cafeterias, childcare and elder care facilities, retailers, and workplaces.

**16. Foster local small food businesses' startup and sustainability in underserved communities.** Provide technical assistance, market research, seed funding, and advocate for regulation changes that reduce startup costs for small food businesses via Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFIs) Fund, Healthy Food Financing (HFFI), American Rescue Plan (ARPA) funding, and philanthropy. The CDFIs Fund plays an important role in generating economic growth and opportunity in

distressed communities. By offering tailored resources and innovative programs, CDFIs can invest federal dollars alongside private sector capital to support small food businesses. For example, New Jersey CDFIs have focused on food insecurity during COVID-19 and expressed interest in collaborating with RWJF on such an approach. A significant amount of federal ARPA funding allocated to New Jersey to support urban renewal could be relevant for implementing this recommendation.

**MODEL: Mississippi Delta Online Grocery Delivery Program.** HOPE is a minority- and women-owned Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI) that serves parts of the southern United States. HOPE works to leverage the power of the financial system to improve the lives of underserved communities across the Deep South. A Healthy Food Financing Initiative (HFFI) grant supports the Mississippi Delta Online Grocery Delivery Program (MDOGDP). MDOGDP uses a "hub and spoke" model; individual grocery orders are made via online grocery ordering software, then they are aggregated for a retail partner to fill. After that, the purchases are transported the last mile from the retail partner back to the community site for pickup by residents. The MDOGDP model allows for purchases with, among other tender, SNAP benefits.

**MODEL: Locally owned microbusinesses.** Locally owned microbusinesses can address both low food access and poor economic conditions that affect food insecurity. USDA's Food LINC initiative offers an example of investment in food-focused microbusinesses. Food LINC utilized the framework of "Food Value Chains" to promote collaborative business planning, along with transparency and exchange of information between food system actors such as farmers and retailers. The Food LINC project resulted in 34 percent increased returns to producers and helped participants unlock additional federal funding and enlist philanthropic partners. Food LINC funded a "value chain coordinator" whose responsibilities included providing technical assistance to farmers, convening food system actors, and assisting in contract negotiations.

**17. Leverage the New Jersey Food Desert Relief Program (NJFDRP) to equitably improve food access for individuals who face transportation and delivery barriers.** Leverage the NJFDRP to improve transportation options for residents to obtain food from retailers and to improve residents' access to food delivery options. The NJFDRP's designations of food deserts have implications for place-based initiatives and coordinating—leveraging and coordinating with the NJFDR program's efforts will create synergy and success.

**MODEL: Fresh stop markets.** New Roots (Louisville, KY) hosts farm-fresh food markets located in fresh food insecure neighborhoods. Markets pop up every two weeks during the growing season, at churches, businesses, and community centers. Shareholders pay on an income-based sliding scale, two weeks before each pickup date. People who want to buy shares do so through a phone app.

**MODEL: Cooperatively owned grocery store.** Mandela Grocery (Oakland, CA) is a cooperative grocery store operated by its worker-owners and guided by their mission to support and strengthen the surrounding community. The shop's food items are sourced from local farmers and purveyors and aim to support businesses operated by people of color.

## PLACE-BASED INITIATIVES

**18. Create and expand the use of Double up Bucks, Produce Prescription Programs, and other nutrition incentives at local retailers and farmers markets, maximizing and leveraging SNAP, P-EBT, and WIC benefits.** This place-based food justice work would use a person-centered and bottom-up approach to meet the unique needs of people in one given location by working together to use the best available resources and collaborate to gain local knowledge and insight. Supporting nutrition benefit adequacy, such as the recent significant temporary increase in the WIC fruit and vegetable benefit levels and the permanent increase in SNAP benefit through the revision of the Thrifty Food Plan, is of primary importance.

Leveraging mechanisms to maximize purchasing power provided by federal nutrition programs, for example, by streamlining SNAP income and expenses verifications, is vital to the success of nutrition incentive programs. In conjunction with broader benefit adequacy efforts, support for nutrition incentives programs can help meet the needs of people, small businesses, and farmers.

**19. Ensure streamlined and stigma-free benefit redemption via stores or online for all SNAP and WIC clients.** Enhance the experience of residents redeeming nutrition benefits by:

- ▶ creating and evaluating WIC and SNAP online purchasing pilots for local retailers;
- ▶ fostering the development of WIC vendor customer service and stocking that supports a good WIC shopping experience; and
- ▶ considering other retail options such as WIC-only stores that cater to WIC clients' purchasing needs and convenience.

The WIC and SNAP shopping experience is central to participant satisfaction, continued participation, and supporting food security and good nutrition. Local agencies should offer the training, tools, and materials participants need to prepare for a successful shopping trip. Allow innovation during COVID to inform a successful future for food shopping for WIC and SNAP participants. This will include the New Jersey online SNAP shopping pilot. WIC could also pilot online ordering options including those offered by WIC-authorized grocery stores and retail vendors or the New Jersey Food Desert Relief Project, through systems that are secure, accurate, and reliable, while avoiding additional costs for WIC programs or participants. In addition, WIC-only stores, small retail grocers with a business model that focuses on WIC participants, could be considered for densely populated underserved areas. Considerations include state and federal policy barriers, the role of the WIC-only store in relation to other grocery and food desert initiatives, and the views of WIC participants.

**20. In partnership with local governments, leverage federal funding to build food-based, community-driven, economic development enterprises.** In partnership with local governments, leverage federal funding (such as Community Development Block Grants and U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Section 108 Loan Guarantee Funding) to build food-based, community-driven, economic development enterprises, such as an employee-owned growers cooperative or food processing facilities. Employ a development strategy that uses food and agriculture to create economic opportunities, healthy neighborhoods, and explicitly seeks to build community assets, pride, and power by and with historically marginalized communities.

**MODEL: Green City Growers Cooperative (GCGC)** is a cooperative urban greenhouse in the heart of Cleveland, Ohio, that leveraged HUD Section 108 funding to develop their land. GCGC operates a 3.25-acre hydroponic greenhouse, growing and selling food to nearby grocery stores and wholesale produce businesses. GCGC is an example of an innovative and employee-owned food production enterprise. It is revitalizing Cleveland's Central neighborhood while providing quality employment opportunities, building community wealth and assets, and promoting healthy food access in the neighborhood and citywide.

**MODEL: Access to resources for immigrant and urban new farmers.** The University of Vermont: New American Farmer Project aims to support refugee and immigrant farms by providing resources, marketing, coaching, and skills training. The New American Farmer Project's overarching goal is to help community organizations more effectively address food security. Groundswell Center Incubator Farm Program (Ithaca, NY) assists new farmers with startup costs, such as securing affordable farming land, language interpretation if needed, along with mentoring and business skills training. It is particularly inclusive of farmers who face systemic barriers to establishing their own businesses, such as people of color, refugees, and women.



## Build infrastructure and capacity necessary to leverage current and emerging policy and program opportunities among community organizations and governmental agencies, especially among entities under-resourced and traditionally marginalized

### OUTREACH & COORDINATION

**21. Leverage the USDA WIC innovation funds to promote trusted messenger community organizations outreach.** Leverage the USDA American Rescue Plan WIC innovation funds to promote re-grants to trusted community partners, such as anti-hunger, faith-based, and maternal and infant mortality and health initiatives, coalitions and organizations to connect eligible families to WIC. Effective outreach by trusted community partners could broaden the reach of WIC and help overcome barriers to participation. For example, clarifying common misconceptions about WIC eligibility, especially countering common misbeliefs by providing information that low-wage working families, immigrant families, and children ages 1–5 years old are eligible. Funding community-based trusted messengers and leaders to connect people and communities to WIC is particularly important for underserved communities. WIC outreach, coordination, and connections in a shared language and culture is meaningful and compelling.

**MODEL: WIC Outreach Project.** The WIC Outreach Project was intended to increase retention rates among eligible children in New Castle County, Delaware, through a partnership between the State of Delaware WIC Program and the Food Bank of Delaware. Findings from previous research indicate that the major barriers to continued participation for WIC are lack of eligibility awareness as well as time, travel, and language barriers. This project was intended to address all these barriers by creating culturally and linguistically relevant marketing materials to increase awareness of eligibility and conducting on-site certifications at childcare facilities throughout New Castle County, Delaware.

**22. Strengthen outreach campaigns to maximize ongoing flexibilities and expanded benefit options enacted during the pandemic.** Maximize options and flexibilities including the (1) Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) Area Eligibility Waiver, (2) CACFP Emergency Shelter Age Expansion, (3) free school meals for all, (4) P-EBT, (5) SNAP enhanced benefits (permanent increase in the benefit levels), and (6) senior meals programs including the increased availability of home-delivered meals.

**23. Increase the public understanding and awareness that solving food insecurity is vital to the health and well-being of individuals, families, the New Jersey economy, and every local community.** Co-create campaigns, materials, and opportunities to increase the public understanding and awareness that solving food insecurity is vital. Establish mechanisms for sharing and amplifying the voices/stories, information, and analysis focused on food security (e.g., central website, story maps). An array of organizations, academic institutions, foundations, state and local agencies and governments have information that could be helpful in determining need, informing planning and evaluating success and barriers, and offering a compelling narrative around food insecurity in New Jersey. Equity goals demand better access to race/ethnicity data in a number of sectors.

**24. Supplement capacity of state and local agencies and organizations to prepare strong proposals.** It is necessary to supplement capacity of state and local agencies and organizations to prepare strong proposals for and/or maximize use of competitive and noncompetitive USDA and other federal grants and provide matching support when applicable. We have

created a [guide to federal funding opportunities](#) that can be creatively leveraged to enhance food security and foster food-focused economic resiliency for local New Jersey communities, including model examples of how the funding has been leveraged and descriptions of where New Jersey stands in relation to these funding streams. Provide capacity, training, technical assistance, and best practices to community-based organizations, especially to those with limited capacity to apply for and leverage ongoing and emerging food access funding streams.

### POLICY & SYSTEMS

**25. Pursue waivers and demonstration projects that adapt certain temporary COVID-19 flexibilities and changes in services and benefits for the longer term.** For example, SNAP customers and stakeholders who were asked for input during COVID-19 reported that elimination of interviews unless information submitted was questionable, telephonic signatures, and lengthened certification periods were among things that improved access during COVID-19. Some of these and other matters were allowed either pursuant to USDA's regular waiver authority or enhanced waiver authority by Congress for the duration of the pandemic health emergency. Certain other temporary improvements, such as SNAP Emergency Allotments, suspension of SNAP time limits, and eased SNAP access for college students were established by Congress only for the duration of the pandemic. Nonetheless, when the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency has been lifted, New Jersey may have opportunities to get waivers from USDA to continue some practices and pilot approaches under demonstration authority.

**26. Foster cross-sector partnerships and memorandums of understanding to enable continued remote services and benefits issuance long term.** Foster partnerships and memorandums of understanding across sectors including health care, education, the federal nutrition program state agencies and other social service state agencies to enable remote benefit issuance and services long term through secure channels.

For example, Medicaid state agency sharing participation data with food state program agencies will:

- ▶ help increase enrollment in WIC (and potentially school meals) through automatic eligibility mechanisms that streamline program access, reduce red tape and stigma;
- ▶ allow targeted outreach for the significant number of participants enrolled in Medicaid but not SNAP or WIC; and
- ▶ facilitate the exchange of health data, height/weight and hematocrit, to reduce duplicate tests and facilitate WIC virtual services.

**27. Leverage American Rescue Plan Act, as well as New Jersey state food program legislation funding and momentum to advance food security.** Leverage American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), and potentially other federal funding to advance food security through (1) early child care and education initiatives; (2) healthy school meals for all initiatives; (3) Summer EBT; and (4) other options. Support and inform the implementation of recent New Jersey state statutes requiring the Commissioner of Human Services to streamline the SNAP application process for senior citizens and conduct outreach to seniors; directing the Department of Human Services to develop mobile software for SNAP recipients (appropriates \$2 million); requiring the Department of Labor & Workforce Development to provide a link to New Jersey SNAP; and establishing a state supplement for federal Summer Food Service Program meals.

**MODEL: Virginia Food Access Investment Fund (VFAIF) Grants** is a statewide program begun in fiscal year (FY) 2021 that invests in new or expanding food retailers. VFAIF offers grants and loans to fund the business development, construction, rehabilitation, equipment upgrades and expansion of grocery stores, small food retailers, and innovative food retail projects in historically marginalized communities. For FY 2021, 15 projects across the Commonwealth received a total of over \$620,000.

- 28. Strengthen customer service in SNAP and other benefit programs at the county and local levels.** In alignment with the White House executive order, *Transforming Federal Customer Experience and Service Delivery to Rebuild Trust in Government*, New Jersey can improve quality and equity of customer service in SNAP and other benefit programs at the county and local levels. Priorities for action include:
- ▶ streamlining and improving readability of paper and online applications, including by using plain language in the participants' preferred language;
  - ▶ examining the level of customer service provided at county Boards of Social Services to identify challenges and solutions at the county level;
  - ▶ administering a customer satisfaction survey to SNAP recipients to identify facilitators and barriers in each county; and
  - ▶ creating a call center where people can access a live person to assist with issues over the phone in addition to in-person assistance options.

## PLACE-BASED INITIATIVES

- 29. Leverage American Rescue Plan or other funding and issue a request for proposals to provide innovative and trusted local organizations matching funds for USDA's SNAP outreach funding.** Expand community outreach to educate the public about the program and assist more potentially eligible residents in completing the application process, with a focus on college students, older adults, immigrants, and the newly unemployed. This should include expanded state funding of additional and more intensive outreach efforts and engaging new partners, such as the health care and school systems, outstationed eligibility staff at colleges or other key community sites, and other enhanced efforts in reaching potentially eligible residents.
- 30. Provide a structure and mechanism for organizations, municipalities, and residents to work together to address barriers and protocols that lead to application denials and churning out of programs.** Establish ongoing communication mechanisms for collaborative evaluation of enrollment, denials, participation, and dropouts, and for constructive problem solving. For example, in Bergen and Passaic counties, HFNJ, CFBNJ, BSS, and PCFPC are working collaboratively to reduce SNAP denial rates for eligible households. An analysis of SNAP data showed that SNAP proof of residency and income are the most common reasons for denials.

# Conclusion

The dual economic and health crises being driven by COVID-19 have ushered in unprecedented levels of food insecurity and widened disparities along geographic lines and by race and ethnicity. There are a multitude of stakeholders and initiatives in New Jersey aiming to address food insecurity. There is a unique opportunity to create an intentional, coordinated response to hunger through creative, diverse, and widespread strategies.

Now is the time for state and local policymakers, state agency leaders, community and nonprofit groups, philanthropic organizations, leaders in the private sector, and others to collaborate, break out of our silos, and collectively invest in addressing food insecurity. In this report, we outline policies, systems changes, cross-sector

outreach, and programmatic initiatives to help reduce food insecurity and support good nutrition and health equity during and beyond the public health emergency. We urge stakeholders to come together to advance the recommendations.

Ensuring that no one in New Jersey goes hungry is foundational to health, education, and economic priorities. As the impacts of COVID-19 continue, New Jersey must continue to lead through action by addressing food insecurity, a crucial determinant of health. This is necessary to create a healthier, more prosperous, and more just society where all people and communities have equitable opportunity to nutritious foods and good health, contributing to a culture of health for all in New Jersey.



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### About the Food Research & Action Center

The Food Research & Action Center (FRAC) improves the nutrition, health, and well-being of people struggling against poverty-related hunger in the United States through advocacy, partnerships, and by advancing bold and equitable policy solutions. For more information, go to [frac.org](http://frac.org).

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## Endnotes

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