

BRONXIMPACT

Food Access Collective

NYC Mayor's Office of Food Policy
10-Year Food Policy Plan Recommendations
November 24, 2020

Bronx Impact's Food Access Collective (BIFAC) believes that all Bronx residents deserve food justice - equitable local access to affordable, fresh, nutritious, culturally relevant choices. We believe an equitable food system fuels the entire community, fostering the healthier livelihoods, thriving local economies, and sustainable environments vital to community wellbeing. We believe that community stakeholders deserve the power and resources to realize and sustain the food system solutions which they envision, and to fill the systemic gaps which persist despite this community innovation. We work to advance food justice by centering these innovative solutions, and interrogating systems to advocate for the redistribution of power and resources to sustain these solutions and fill the system gaps which persist through and beyond the city's pandemic recovery.

We collectively envision an approach which promotes just, equitable food access for all Bronx residents, including and especially:

- those with **information sharing sensitivities** (like undocumented families, homeless individuals, and those who may be experiencing domestic/intimate partner violence)
- those who **rely on delivery** of items/meals (such as the elderly, immunocompromised, disabled, or geographically disconnected)
- those relying on the **cultural relevance and appropriateness** of available services and items/meals (including dietary restrictions for religious, health, or personal preference reasons)
- those relying on **school and/or emergency food/nutrition supports**

Thank you in advance for your time and consideration of our feedback and recommendations. We look forward to continuing to engage with you about the status of food security in the Bronx and across New York City. Bronx Impact, The Bronx Community Foundation, and other partners are also working towards building a borough-wide Food Insecurity Coalition to advocate for our communities and those who serve them. To support the work of this coalition, The Bronx Community Foundation will hire a Food Insecurity Coordinator to serve as a dedicated resource to execute an integrated, holistic, borough-wide strategy to eradicate food insecurity alongside the Mayor's Office of Food Policy and other policymakers with equivalent goals.

Sincerely,

Bronx Impact's Food Access Collective and Partners

Endorsements enclosed below

*Submitted on behalf of Bronx Impact's Food Access Collective by Allison Marino, Director of Bronx Impact
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BRONX IMPACT

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**THE CAMPAIGN FOR
A HEALTHY BRONX**

#Not62 *The Campaign for a Healthier Bronx*



Nancy Easton *Co-founder & Executive Director, Wellness in the Schools*

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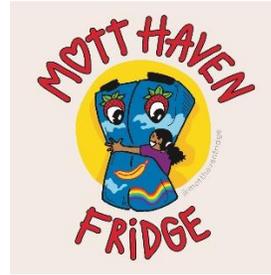


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Voices of Women

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Context and Values

Context: Amplified and Exacerbated Structural Inequities

The Bronx is impacted by numerous long-standing structural inequities which have repressed equitable access to nutritious food choices. The Bronx is home to the Hunts Point Food Distribution Center, including Hunts Point Cooperative Market, and the Terminal Market, the largest meat and produce markets in the world, respectively¹. Despite this major food resource, the Distribution Center's home borough has struggled for decades with disproportionate access to fresh and nutritious food. Supermarket access is relatively poor for Bronx residents, where 9 of 12 community districts fall short of the City Average Ratio for Local Grocery Stores to People². An average 17 percent of over 1.4 million Bronx residents struggle to access at least one serving of fruits or vegetables per day³, due to a lack of local access to fresh, affordable produce. Access to nutritious food is particularly limited in neighborhoods like Bronx Community District 6, where supermarket square footage per capita is the lowest of any district in the city⁴, and with 37 bodegas to each supermarket⁵.

While financial constraints have always further suppressed access to healthy groceries even where supermarkets are available⁶, the Covid-19 pandemic has amplified and exacerbated inequitable food access. More than half of NY households have reported serious financial problems during the pandemic, compared to 46 percent of households nationally. The dual public health and crises are further exacerbating the wealth, income and food security divide between racial and ethnic groups, with 62 percent of Black households and 73 percent of Latino households reporting serious problems paying major bills and/or buying food since March⁷. Asian New Yorkers have outpaced all other groups in growth in unemployment claims, from hundreds of claims per month before the pandemic to tens of thousands of claims per month during⁸. These numbers are expected to climb in coming months, with the City's unemployment rate approaching 20 percent, a rate not seen since the Great Depression. We see the impacts of this widening divide in particularly clear relief when considering the Bronx, with a July 2020 unemployment rate just shy of 25 percent⁹.

Prior to the pandemic, an estimated 2.5 million New Yorkers were facing food insecurity, and at least another 800,000 more have since begun to face food challenges¹⁰. The Bronx had a 17.5 percent borough-wide food insecurity rate for 2019, representing over 250,000 food insecure individuals, with 100 percent of food insecure individuals living at or below the SNAP eligibility

¹ <https://www.osc.state.ny.us/files/reports/osdc/pdf/huntspoint-2008.pdf>

² http://www.nyc.gov/html/misc/pdf/going_to_market.pdf

³ <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/doh/downloads/pdf/data/2018chp-bx6.pdf>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ [https://www.cdc.gov/pcd/issues/2017/17_0104.htm#:~:text=The%20New%20York%20City%20Department,the%20previous%20day%20\(5\)](https://www.cdc.gov/pcd/issues/2017/17_0104.htm#:~:text=The%20New%20York%20City%20Department,the%20previous%20day%20(5))

⁷ Neel, Joe. "NPR Poll: Financial Pain From Coronavirus Pandemic 'Much, Much Worse' Than Expected". Sept 9, 2020. https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2020/09/09/909669760/npr-poll-financial-pain-from-coronavirus-pandemic-much-much-worse-than-expected?utm_campaign=storyshare&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_medium=social

⁸ <https://blog.aabany.org/2020/10/14/asian-american-federation-of-new-yorks-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-asian-american-employment-in-new-york-city/>

⁹ <https://pfnyc.org/research/new-york-city-covid-19-economic-impact-update/>

¹⁰ <https://www.ny1.com/nyc/all-boroughs/inside-city-hall/2020/09/18/fighting-food-insecurity-in-nyc-amid-pandemic>

threshold¹¹. Some Bronx neighborhoods, such as Community Districts 3 and 6 were already experiencing food insecurity rates as high as 24 percent¹². Despite the increase in demand for emergency food access services associated with the economic impacts of the pandemic, nearly 40 percent of the city's food pantries and community kitchens closed during the height of the crisis in April. The Bronx saw the highest proportion of service closures of all boroughs city-wide, with 50 percent of Bronx emergency food services having shuttered, 90 percent of these being in the highest need areas¹³. These closures, coupled with significantly decreased capacity for remaining services, exacerbated by mass funding cuts and other economic hardships throughout the city, have resulted in the currently inadequate quantity of available emergency food supports to Bronx residents, and have significantly impacted the quality of available supports.

To address the long-standing structural inequities which cause the circumstances amplified and exacerbated by the present public health and economic crises, Bronx Impact launched the Food Access Collective. This collective of emergency food and support service providers, food system innovators, and advocates believes that all Bronx residents deserve equitable access to affordable, nutritious, culturally relevant choices. We center community voices identifying barriers to wellbeing and proposing innovative solutions. We advance food justice by advocating for the redistribution of resources to sustain these solutions and fill the system gaps which persist.

Values: An Equitable Recovery

While efforts have been made at the federal, state, and city levels to address food insecurity issues throughout the pandemic, resources are insufficient and have not been distributed in an equitable manner. For example, the federal Farmers to Families Food Box Program has provided scant relief to our region, with organizations serving the Northeast receiving just 4 percent of program contract funds in both the first and second rounds of awards, while roughly 10 percent of the nation's population resides in the area¹⁴. With the New York State budget upended by the economic impacts of the pandemic, the federal Covid-19 Relief Package passed by the Senate in July 2020 is only projected to cover less than half of New York State's budget shortfall¹⁵. With minimal forthcoming federal and state appropriations for food insecurity solutions, City Hall slated \$25 million to support city food pantries and community kitchens. This funding was split between a total of 10 nonprofit organizations, making funding and supplying smaller, more local community based organizations particularly difficult¹⁶. This may be a contributing factor to the lengths people must go to access services that we are noticing across the Bronx. In fact, a June 2020 report by Feeding America found that 67 percent of Manhattan

¹¹ <https://map.feedingamerica.org/county/2018/overall/new-york/county/bronx>

¹² https://1giqgs400j4830k22r3m4wqg-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/Fighting-More-Than-Covid-19_Research-Report_Food-Bank-For-New-York-City_6.09.20_web.pdf

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ https://www.timesunion.com/news/article/Reps-federal-food-aid-program-offers-little-help-15406608.php?mc_cid=05efe723e2&mc_eid=39b93930f1

¹⁵ <https://www.governor.ny.gov/news/governor-cuomo-and-governor-hogan-statement-us-senate-proposal-covid-19-relief-package>

¹⁶ <https://www.politico.com/states/new-york/albany/story/2020/04/21/big-names-in-emergency-food-network-divide-citys-25-million-1278837>

emergency food organizations reported serving clients from the Bronx in addition to Manhattan residents¹⁷.

While the funding supplied to these 10 organizations is necessary and appreciated by the community and those who serve them, this model does not present a sustainable, equitable path to food security for all. This model may have promoted the City's reliance on more local CBOs' leverage of their community and social capital to receive and connect people to resources. However, this model does not adequately compensate local CBOs for this value, impacting the ongoing viability of CBO operations and ultimately compromising the City's sustainable, meaningful engagement with communities. This is particularly pressing due to the significant decrease in capacity CBOs are experiencing across the board, with cuts to funding, safety precautions which limit in-person operations, and reduced staff and volunteer ranks. While local, community-embedded CBOs are particularly well positioned to connect the City and community members, sharing information about resources and needs, they are not currently adequately supported to fill this gap for the long term. Local organizations require dedicated resources and support from the City to continue to play this vital role between city services and those who rely on them.

Values: Rebuilding More Equitable Futures

We believe that promotion of just food access for all will allow us to collectively address the long-standing systemic inequities and disproportionate impacts of the present crisis to fuel entire communities. An equitable approach to promoting food access has the power to foster the healthier livelihoods, thriving local economies, and sustainable environments vital to community wellbeing. According to MyPlate, the federal nutrition guide published by the USDA, fruits and vegetables should make up about half the plate of any individual meal, with 30 percent overall comprised of vegetables and 20 percent of fruit¹⁸. However, only 83 percent of Bronx adults report eating at least one fruit or vegetable in the past day, below the citywide rate of 87 percent.¹⁹ People who eat 3 or more fruits or vegetables per day are 42% less likely to die of stroke and 24% less likely to die of heart disease than those who eat less than one per day²⁰.

The Bronx has the highest percentage of both children and adults diagnosed with asthma of all the city's boroughs²¹. Research has found South Bronx students are twice as likely to attend a school near a highway as children in other parts of the city, and about one fifth attend schools within 500 feet of a major highway²². Fine air pollution particles, especially of the nature produced by diesel truck engines, is linked with respiratory conditions like asthma, as well as heart attack²³. The same study found that the 5 to 10 percent of fine particles of pollution in the air which come from diesel truck exhaust impact children's asthma most heavily, with asthma symptoms doubling on days when truck traffic is highest. Investments in local farms, gardens, and food businesses can reduce the need for diesel trucks to transport food into and throughout the city, reducing asthma-causing pollution and the city's overall carbon footprint. Further, regenerative farming

¹⁷ https://1giqgs400j4830k22r3m4wqg-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/Fighting-More-Than-Covid-19_Research-Report_Food-Bank-For-New-York-City_6.09.20_web.pdf

¹⁸ <https://foh.psc.gov/calendar/nutrition>

¹⁹ <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/doh/downloads/pdf/data/2018chp-bx6.pdf>

²⁰ http://www.nyc.gov/html/misc/pdf/going_to_market.pdf

²¹ <https://www.montefiore.org/documents/communityservices/OCPH-Dashboard-asthma.pdf>

²² <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1wLYMudfFYBbov9uWHkfSwCwFsWdW20zQ51lp3NwPxck/edit>

²³ *Ibid.*

should be implemented and supported to capture existing carbon to additionally minimize the city's overall impact on climate change.

Local access to a wide array of fresh, affordable food choices should not be considered a luxury amenity by neighborhood developers, real estate interests, or corporations, but rather a basic, necessary neighborhood resource. Centering and investing in community access to affordable food, especially in locally grown produce and locally manufactured products, can spur the sustainable development and redevelopment of whole local economies. The launch of urban farms, community gardens, and local food businesses should be subsidized and supported with technical assistance and other resources, promoting their ability to operate sustainably long-term while including fair pay, benefits and conditions to associated workers from within the community. Further, partnership and integration of such resources into the work and operations of other vital community services and institutions should be promoted. Healthcare facilities and schools could especially benefit from sustainable access to affordable, local, healthy foods. In these ways, food justice can be expanded in communities across the city without displacing the current and long-standing community residents and institutions upon which they rely.

Recommendations

We are advocating for equitable distribution of adequate resources to ensure that all families are able to access affordable, appropriate, nutritious food choices, and that community organizations on the front lines of the response to food insecurity can implement solutions effectively. We call upon the New York City Mayor's Office of Food Policy to work strategically, responsively and collaboratively with our communities and those who serve them to reduce impacts on food security from the COVID-19 pandemic, and to address the inequities in the contributing systems. We recommend directing resources and support towards the following, to help address and alleviate food security issues and equitably promote just food access across the Bronx and New York City:

1. Work to increase the **cultural relevance and appropriateness of available retail and emergency food and nutrition resources** by taking the following measures:
 - 1.1. **Increase access to fresh, whole, and unprepared ingredients** so that preparation of meals can be controlled to ensure they comply with individual dietary needs and restrictions. Many prepared emergency nutrition support meals do not comply with such health-related restrictions as sodium or sugar content.
 - 1.1.1. **Ensure the cultural relevance and usability of ingredients provided** in Get Food boxes and other nutrition support resources by engaging community members about the products made available, to promote the availability of products that community members use and need most and are familiar with.
 - 1.1.1.1. Ensure the adequate availability of culturally relevant products from City contractors. For example, currently available contracts do not include purveyors which carry halal meats, leaving larger pantries which serve halal communities unable to provide meat products to their clients.

- 1.1.2. Promote community members' ability to use the ingredients provided by **funding culturally specific educational cooking and nutrition programming** by local CBOs.
- 1.1.3. **Continue to ensure that high quality prepared meals are readily available** for community members without access to kitchens or cooking appliances/tools through appropriation of existing public funds.
- 1.1.4. **Increase the School Food budget to purchase fresh foods from local and regional farms**, with a focus on fresh whole foods as ingredients and meal components through reallocation of existing public funds.
- 1.2. **Ensure quality, variety, and individual choice of emergency food resources designed to comply with dietary restrictions** such as vegetarian or Halal.
 - 1.2.1. Further, ensure that such meals are dietarily appropriate to serve as a full meal, including a robust variety of nutrients and food groups.
 - 1.2.2. Label all prepared meals with all ingredients and nutritional values so that recipients can make informed decisions about the appropriateness of meals for their dietary needs.
- 1.3. **Increase the accessibility of culturally relevant SNAP and WIC eligible foods by promoting the culturally relevant expansion of sites which accept these forms of payment.** While larger grocery chains may carry some SNAP and WIC eligible items customary to certain groups, they are infrequently of the exact style or brand that such groups would normally choose for themselves. Smaller, more locally accessible grocery stores which do carry such exact items often lack the infrastructure to accept EBT transactions.
 - 1.3.1. **Work with Black, Brown, and other culturally relevant business owners and community members** to identify locations where program accessibility should be expanded. This should be considered a priority investment in the promotion of small minority-owned businesses and low-income economies city-wide, funded by the reallocation of existing public funds.
 - 1.3.2. Further, make acceptance of EBT transactions a viable, accessible option for vendors by funding or seeking appropriations to **cover or subsidize terminal and transaction fees** through the reallocation of existing public funds.
- 1.4. **See the city's various communities as more than monolithic groups, but rather as communities with unique cultural needs and preferences.** Cater available resources to each of these communities' needs by meaningfully engaging with community members and leaders to learn more deeply about how these unique cultural, dietary and religious customs and practices impact community needs. For example, while hummus may be considered a common halal food for some cultural groups, not all people who eat halal are from the region of the world where hummus is regularly eaten. African or Southeast Asian communities may not be accustomed to such products being made available for halal eaters, even if they comply with restrictions.

2. Reach more people with **information-sharing sensitivities** (such as undocumented or homeless families, or those who may be experiencing domestic/intimate partner violence) by working to **expand community knowledge of which programs request what information and for what reasons through trusted community members and organizations**. Often, the general public cannot easily ascertain which services they can safely, adequately, and comfortably access without sharing certain personal information.
 - 2.1. Consider, invest in, and support the sustainable implementation of **technological solutions to support information accessibility** through public-private partnerships and additional federal funding.
 - 2.1.1. Advocate on behalf of NYC residents for new sources of federal investment and support in technological solutions for low-income communities through passage and full funding of legislation such as the HOPE Act of 2020 (H.R. 6217 / S.3484). The HOPE Act enables municipalities to create digital accounts which simultaneously help people apply for multiple public benefits while affording access to crucial online banking tools.
 - 2.2. Make information about available resources more available and accessible to all people in all neighborhoods who speak all languages by going beyond print and digital material translation to **actively and responsively engaging with various communities in culturally relevant and specific manners**.
 - 2.2.1. Segment food and emergency nutrition support resource communications for various communities, **tailor and target outreach and materials specifically to the language, culture, and needs of each specific community**.
 - 2.2.2. **Create simpler, more responsive outreach materials** to engage more effectively with communities across the city that speak a first language other than English. Simplify jargon and teach the meaning of new important vocabulary (i.e. coronavirus, Public Charge). **Use graphic depictions to overcome translation, literacy, and jargon issues**. Community Food Advocates is a great example of an organization producing such materials.
3. Work to impact the overall food system infrastructure to **promote the availability of affordable, high quality fresh produce, particularly in the emergency food supply** and in communities which rely on nutrition supports by taking the following measures:
 - 3.1. **Expand the use of Health Bucks as SNAP incentives at Fresh Food Box sites, mobile produce vendors, and other local retail establishments selling produce** in addition to farm stands and farmers markets through reallocation of existing public funds.
 - 3.2. Work with the New York State Department of Agriculture & Markets and New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance to seek a waiver of Federal SNAP policies to **allow mobile produce vendors to accept EBT transactions**.
 - 3.2.1. Further, make acceptance of EBT transactions a viable, accessible option for vendors by funding or seeking appropriations to **cover or subsidize terminal and transaction fees** through reallocation of existing public funds.

- 3.3. **Provide funding and technical assistance to food manufacturers** (producers, distributors and other food businesses) to modify and shift production and distribution systems in response to Covid-19 (technology, distribution, business models).
 - 3.4. **Create a grant or low interest loan program** consisting of private partnership and publicly available funds managed by the NYC Urban Agriculture Office targeted to Bronx residents **to fund urban agricultural startups** and their acquisition of equipment, land/indoor growing space and staff. The Office should also provide technical assistance to awardees.
 - 3.4.1. Support urban agriculture sites to provide culturally relevant educational programming to address the implications of seasonality of produce local to the NYC region for various cultural groups. Education can include the importance of local, seasonal eating on nutrition and environment, and suggest seasonal substitutions for classic cultural recipes.
 - 3.4.2. Expand training opportunities and help **create a pipeline of urban farming career opportunities** for Bronx residents by funding scholarships to programs such as Farm School NYC.
 - 3.5. Through the reallocation of existing public funds and the promotion of private partnerships, **fund and support the establishment of food cooperatives and strategies to build community ownership within the local food system**, especially in BIPOC communities that have historically had low rates of business establishment by neighborhood residents following the USDA/NIFA Community Food Project model.
 - 3.5.1. Understanding the implications of seasonality and locality on availability of culturally relevant produce, support the affordable, sustainable procurement of culturally relevant products which are not local to the region, but upon which the city's diverse cultural groups may rely through community-owned food cooperatives.
 - 3.6. **Fund and support the establishment and sustainable operations of grassroots, no-barrier food resources, such as community fridges** by promoting public-private partnerships with sustained, scalable impact.
4. **Channel power and resources to local CBOs and those most impacted by the problems at hand to create and sustain impactful solutions** by taking the following measures:
- 4.1. **Create a COVID-relief fund specifically for local nonprofits that feed marginalized communities**, to ensure there are enough operating food pantries to serve all in need adequately and effectively. The fund should function similar to the Paycheck Protection Program and the Small Business Services grants offered by the City earlier in the pandemic. These funds should also be allowed to be used towards rent and other overhead costs.
 - 4.2. **Distribute city funds for emergency food and nutrition support services equitably across the city by prioritizing organizations with the community connections, knowledge, and capacity to serve the most food insecure communities effectively.**

- 4.2.1. **Promote transparency around the funding process** by releasing comprehensive announcements of funding opportunities and selected awardees, including for City Council discretionary funding.
- 4.3. **Provide technical assistance and other material supports to service providers** to broaden and deepen the impact of their work:
 - 4.3.1. Connect service providers to wholesalers and each other to **maximize quality and quantity product received for dollars spent** (i.e bulk group purchasing models).
 - 4.3.2. Connect service providers with resources to **expand bulk dry and refrigerated storage, receiving and packaging abilities.**
 - 4.3.3. Help service providers to **create sustainable relationships with delivery service providers.**
 - 4.3.4. Ensure that organizations serving seniors and others who rely on delivery are adequately supported to **provide efficient delivery of adequate, appropriate, high quality food and nutrition support, and that this service is continually afforded to all who need it.**