# Basic Needs Distribution during COVID-19: Considerations and Modifications

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## Basic Needs and COVID-19

In the current landscape, there is a growing need for food and basic needs programs. Prior to COVID-19, 37 million people in America were already struggling with hunger. The crisis that has resulted from COVID-19, has increased the need and demand for supportive programming.

For example, many families rely on free breakfasts and lunches offered through schools. With children and teens out of school and learning from home, the demand on already struggling families has increased. Further, social distancing measures have resulted in many people being laid off. This has created unexpected financial strains on households. It is clear that the need for community meals, food pantries, clothing, and essential supplies programming is great.

However, COVID-19 has created unique challenges for these types of programs. Social distancing measures have forced program staff and volunteers to develop unique and creative program modifications that allow people to receive support safely. This booklet will outline some best practices and suggested modifications for basic need programming during COVID-19.

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# Staff and Volunteer Considerations

*The staff and volunteers who deliver programming are critical to a program's success. The following modifications ensure volunteers stay safe and allow for programming to continue during COVID-19.*

## Possible Modifications or Considerations

- Assign high-risk volunteers to tasks that can be done at home
- Engage low-risk volunteers in direct service
- Provide all volunteers adequate personal protective equipment (PPE) and opportunities to sanitize
- Ensure all volunteers understand COVID-19 programming modifications

**Give volunteers at risk of a more severe form of COVID-19 tasks that do not involve direct contact with people or that allow them to serve from home.** While anyone can contract COVID-19, there are certain groups of people at risk of developing a severe case of COVID-19.

High-risk individuals include: people 65 years and older, people who live in a nursing home or long-term care facility, people of all ages with underlying medical conditions including chronic lung disease,

moderate to severe asthma, serious heart conditions, severe obesity, diabetes, chronic kidney disease or liver disease, and people who are immunocompromised. People who have any of these risk factors should be offered the opportunity to serve in a way that does not involve direct contact with people. For example, they can make phone calls to clients to offer encouragement or connect them to services, complete administrative tasks, or take a break from serving until it is safer for them.

**Some programs may need to engage new volunteers who are at a lower risk for developing a severe case of COVID-19 for roles that involve direct contact with people.** It is important to continually monitor volunteer needs and recruit as necessary. Additional volunteers can be recruited from websites such as volunteermatch.com, Facebook, or createthegood.aapr.org.

As a program recruits new volunteers it is best to actively engage people in low-risk groups such as those in their 20s and 30s without health conditions or family members who are at risk. It is important to make sure all volunteers understand the risks involved in serving at this time as well the tremendous benefit to the community.

These volunteers can serve in roles that require them to leave their homes and interact with people such as preparing items for distribution,

distributing items to people served, or dropping off food to families without transportation. These volunteers may be asked to monitor themselves for symptoms, such as by taking their temperature before coming on site to volunteer, and immediately change and wash their clothes upon returning home after volunteering.

**Ensure all volunteers have adequate PPE (personal protective equipment) and opportunities to sanitize.** It is essential that all volunteers have adequate PPE. This equipment is meant to keep both volunteers and people served safe. Generally, PPE involves wearing a face mask and gloves. It is also important to have hand sanitizer available and to encourage all volunteers to wash their hands frequently.

Program staff and volunteers should also be prepared to disinfect workspaces, surfaces, and doorknobs frequently.

**Modifications to programming will only be successful if all volunteers understand and adhere to them.** This will likely require communications prior to programming. This communication can occur through email, virtual meetings (through a platform such as Zoom or Google hangout), or onsite before clients arrive. If staff and volunteers do not understand programming modifications, it can create an unsafe situation and result in a less efficient distribution. It can also add stress and make it more difficult to create a trauma-informed and hospitable atmosphere.

## Distribution Process Considerations

*Without an effective and safe distribution process both volunteers and people served will be put at risk and the process of getting food and other essential items to people in the community may be chaotic and stressful. These suggestions will help ensure items are distributed in a safe and organized manner.*

### Possible Modifications or Considerations:

- **Where people are waiting, mark six-foot intervals and encourage people to space themselves according to the markings**
- **Allow for drive-thru distribution or deliveries**
- **Clearly mark paths for flow of traffic in and out**
- **Consider offering programming outdoors**
- **Control for places where people might touch the same items and employ extra sanitizing**
- **Prepare distribution items for a quick pick-up**
- **Consider extending distribution hours or assigning appointment times served**

**Allow six feet between all people at all times. Social distancing measures suggest that there should be six feet between all people at all times.** This poses a unique challenge for food pantries and other distribution programming where both volunteers and people receiving services are often in close proximity. Further, distributions often attract large groups of people.

**Staff and volunteers must think through the wait time and flow of traffic and develop a plan that maintains distance between each person.** It is important for pantries to consider how they position volunteers and how they direct clients while they are waiting to

receive food and other items. It is common at pantries for there to be large numbers of people waiting to receive food. If possible, the program may consider marking six-foot intervals and encourage people to space themselves according to the markings as they wait. People that drive can wait in their cars for their turn to receive food. Programs can also consider extending their hours so there are fewer people at each distribution.

**Develop a system for drive-thru distribution and/ or deliveries.** If possible, allow clients to drive up to a designated location and stay in their cars as they drive through a line to receive their donated items.

To minimize interactions between clients and volunteers, clients can be instructed to unlock their trunk or have space cleared in a back seat so that a volunteer can place their items in their car. Clients who do not have cars and are home bound can be contacted to arrange a delivery of items to their home. A box or bag of donated goods can be placed on a client's front steps or front porch. Once the delivery is made, the volunteer can call the client to let them know it's available to them.

**Clearly mark paths for flow of traffic in and out. Clients may be accustomed to entering and exiting a program in a certain way or waiting for services in a line or seating area.** However, new routines and habits will need to be learned to keep clients and volunteers safe. Consider mapping out traffic flow patterns on paper to choose the paths that allow services to be provided efficiently and safely. It is best to have clients enter and exit the site in different places to avoid cross traffic. To minimize risk and confusion, it's important to use signs to direct foot and car traffic.

**If possible, it is best for the distribution to take place outside.** Outdoor locations offer a great deal of flexibility with regard to flow of traffic and wait procedure. Many programs create two lines to receive food, one for walk-ins and one for people in cars. For the walk-ins, it is important that there is six feet between people as they wait for their turn to get food. It is also important to consider the flow of traffic for people as they receive food and leave. Many programs mark the paths and flow of traffic with cones or signage. For people arriving in cars, social distancing can be accomplished by encouraging people to remain in their car and having volunteers load food in trunks. A large parking lot, with clearly marked flow of traffic for walking and driving individuals is best for outside distributions.

**Control for places where people might touch the same items.** Programs must consider places where multiple people might touch the same item. For example, some programs have a sign-in where clients use the same pen to sign in or pass out numbers to assign an order to receive food. Other programs offer services in client choice format, which allows people to touch and select their own food. Most situations can be remedied with simple modifications.



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For example, if a sign-in is necessary consider having volunteers sign people in using a phone or tablet. They can verbally collect information and enter it into an online database. Or, consider using paper numbers that can be disposed. Pantries that use client choice format should shift to pre-packing food or having volunteers with PPE pack food that clients select from a list.

Additionally, since currently available evidence suggests that the COVID-19 virus can survive on metal and plastic surfaces for up to three days and about one day on soft surfaces like cardboard, you may encourage clients not to use non-perishable food items and other essential supplies for a few days after they are received or to sanitize packaging and discard or not touch cardboard boxes used to transport items. All produce should be thoroughly washed with soap and water. It may also be beneficial to instruct clients to transfer warm meals served to clean dishware, discard the take-out container, and wash their hands before eating the meal, if possible. All clients and volunteers should be asked to wash their hands frequently, particularly after touching items received through programming.

Prepare distribution items for a quick pick-up. Items will be distributed more quickly if they are prepackaged. This will minimize lines and waiting. Preparing items will likely involve engaging a group of volunteers prior to the distribution to package items so they can be easily placed into the client's car or carried home.

Client choice is a format for pantry distribution that allows clients to select their own food and pack it themselves. While this format is a best practice under normal circumstances and offers food in a more dignifying way, it is not feasible during COVID-19 as multiple people may touch the same items. If possible, pantries can still allow clients to select food options by selecting the items they want from a list and having volunteers pack them.

It is common for clients to bring their own bags to pantries. However, during COVID-19 it is best for pantries to provide a box or bag. If a pantry uses a client's bag from their home, there is the possibility of spreading COVID-19 when multiple people touch the same bag. It is important for programs to ensure items are packed in a bag or box that can handle the weight of the items being transported.

**Extend hours of operation and/or schedule appointments.** To avoid a congestion of people being served at the same time, consider extending hours of operation or serving people additional days of the week. Or, if client contact information is readily available, it's best to schedule appointments so that clients are served one at a time. This may also allow time for volunteers to check-in with clients to alleviate loneliness and ask if there are any other needs they may have.

## Ways to Continue Building Relationships

*Programs have a unique opportunity to offer progamming in a way that makes people feel supported and cared for. Small adjustments to programming that provide points of positive interaction can make a big difference for people who are struggling with isolation and stress.*

### Possible Modifications or Considerations:

- **Maintain a trauma-informed culture and consider ways it can be incorporated into modified programming**
- **Find creative ways to offer hospitality and make clients feel welcomed**
- **Collect contact information and engage volunteers to offer relational support to the people served**

**COVID-19 is a national crisis and for some people a trauma.** Everyone has been impacted by COVID-19 in some way. Most people have been impacted by social distancing measures, have experienced less relational support, and an increased sense of isolation. The majority of the people participating in basic needs distributions have been impacted economically and experienced financial hardships. People who have experienced past trauma are particularly vulnerable to feelings of fear, helplessness, and panic during COVID-19. It is very important that programs are sensitive to the emotional and mental health impact of COVID-19 and maintain a trauma-informed program culture as much as possible.

Trauma-informed care follows five guiding principles that serve as a framework for how service providers and systems of care can work to reduce the likelihood of re-traumatization.

These principles are generalizable across a variety of service settings. Rather than providing a set of practices and procedures, the principles can be interpreted and applied in ways that are appropriate for a specific type of service setting. Each principle is listed below along with ways it can be expressed during COVID-19.

## Trauma-informed Programming during COVID-19

### *Safety*
**Ensuring physical and emotional safety**
- Ensure there is six feet between each person
- Provide all volunteers with PPE and access to sanitizer or hand washing stations
- Distribute face masks to people served if they are available
- Effectively deescalate tense interactions

### *Choice*
**Providing the individual with choice and control**
- Provide clear directions and signage so clients understand what is expected and feel in control
- Offer choices where possible (e.g. Which of the following would you like: produce, non-perishable items, or household supplies?)
- Offer additional support and allow people to opt in (e.g. Would you like information about other resources in the community? Is it okay with you if one of our volunteers gives you a call this week to see if there are other ways our program can support you?)

### *Collaboration*
**Making decisions with the individual and sharing power**
- Requesting feedback from people served

### *Trustworthiness*
**Task clarity, consistency, and interpersonal boundaries**
- Provide clear directions and information about program modifications
- Offer programming consistently on the same days and times
- Consistently treat people with dignity and respect and speak in a calm tone

### *Empowerment*
**Prioritizing empowerment and skill building**
- Emphasize people's strengths
- Share about community programs that build life skills or offer coaching

**Hospitality can be defined as the friendly and warm reception and entertainment of guests.** When programs receive people in a friendly and warm manner people feel welcome, cared for, and valued. Offering hospitality is simple and makes a big difference for a person receiving services. There are simple ways a program can make a person feel welcomed including greeting them, letting them know you are glad they are there, waving as they leave, letting them know the dates and times of future distributions, and letting them know that you hope they will return.

Further, programs may consider posting signs with welcoming messages or messages that offer hope and encouragement. While it may take a little creativity and flexibility, there are many ways program staff and volunteers can show the people they serve that they are glad to see them and hope they will return.

**Programs can also consider offering relational support between distributions.** People who do not have a strong social support network are currently at risk of isolation and loneliness. Social distancing measures encourage people to remain at home as much as possible, which cuts many people off from existing relationships and interactions (e.g. going to the gym, attending church, work, visiting with family members). Therefore, there is a growing need for programs to offer relational interactions and care.

Pantry staff and volunteers can make phone calls to people served. Even short phone calls lasting just a few minutes can make a huge difference for a person who is lonely. Some programs may have volunteers who are not able to serve in their regular capacity because of COVID-19 risk-factors. Making phone calls to clients is a way these volunteers can make a tremendous difference during COVID-19. The names and contact information of people that would like a follow-up call can be collected during the distribution and shared with these volunteers. Or, additional volunteers can be engaged to make phone calls. This relational support can help buffer the impact of social isolation.

## Connecting to Supportive Services

*Many people have been deeply impacted by CVOID-19 and have additional service needs. Programs that are meeting basic needs can help connect people to programming that can more holistically meets their needs and helps them recover from COVID-19.*

**Possible Modifications or Considerations:**

- **Provide printed information about community resources with people receiving services**
- **Offer follow-up phone calls to learn more about household needs and offer more tailored referrals**

**Programs can provide printed information about community resources to people as they distribute food and other items.** Printed information can be prepacked and provided to each person. The impact of COVID-19 is far reaching. The economic impacts have resulted in new segments of the population needing help to navigate services in the community, such as food and utility assistance, unemployment, Medicaid, and mental health, just to name a few. Many people do not even know where to start. Programs might consider creating a resource flyer or using an existing one that contains information about programs in the community that meet these types of needs.

**Programs that are able to offer follow-up phone support might also consider asking people about their household's current needs and offering referrals.** This type of interaction allows a person to receive information about a specific program that is likely to meet their needs.

Of course, this requires volunteers who are knowledgeable about community resources and able to make effective referrals. This type of support can make a big difference and help people access needed services more quickly.

**If it is possible to make multiple calls to the same person, a volunteer can provide follow-up after a referral is made to see if the client was able to access the service.** If not, the volunteer can help the client navigate any challenges. Accessing programs can be overwhelming without support. People who receive a referral and follow-up support are more likely to successfully engage in needed programming than people who simply receive a referral. Follow-up also allows for deeper relational support and referrals to multiple services. Over time, this type of support can help a person connect to needed programs and more successfully overcome the impact of COVID-19 on their lives.