

Commission addresses root causes of food insecurity

By Monica M. Walk

Ending food insecurity and hunger is an immense and multi-layered undertaking, but Illinois has a newly focused approach growing from the collaborative efforts of the Illinois Commission to End Hunger.

More than 25 representatives of public and private agencies worked together with residents to address food-access obstacles that increased significantly during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. The result was a commission action plan, *From Food Insecurity to Food Equity: A Roadmap to End Hunger in Illinois*, providing a focus for short-term action based on long-term advocacy and change.



Courtesy Illinois Commission to End Hunger

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic made food insecurity worse for many who live in Illinois, with Hispanics suffering the most.

The roadmap's short-term action plan spotlights a specific and actionable three-part strategy for leveraging technology, harnessing innovation, and strengthening collaboration. The long-term action requires addressing root causes of poverty, one of which is that communities of color and rural communities often lack equitable access to quality housing, jobs, education, and health services, which affect food insecurity. The report also highlights specific needs and suggested actions for children and senior citizens, as well as mixed-status and immigrant households.

"We want to let people know what's out there, how to access it," said State Senator Mattie Hunter (D-3rd), a member of the commission.

Hunter cited food insecurity tripling for Illinois families with children over the last year and increasing by 60%. "Basically, we are out here to connect the dots, to make it easy to access services and use them," she said. "You can't use them if you don't know about them. The Illinois Hunger Commission's goal is to develop a statewide marketing campaign, especially to reduce the stigma."

The commission created the roadmap with significant input from the people and communities it aims to serve, meeting virtually due to safety restrictions cause by the pandemic.

Community input

"People's lived experience tells the story and needs to be heard," said Angela Odoms-Young, University of Illinois Chicago (UIC) College of Applied Health Sciences associate professor of kinesiology and nutrition. Odoms-Young brought a community research perspective and expertise to the commission, helped moderate virtual focus groups, and attended listening sessions.

"We have all of these folks at the table; it takes everyone," she said. "We tend to be siloed in

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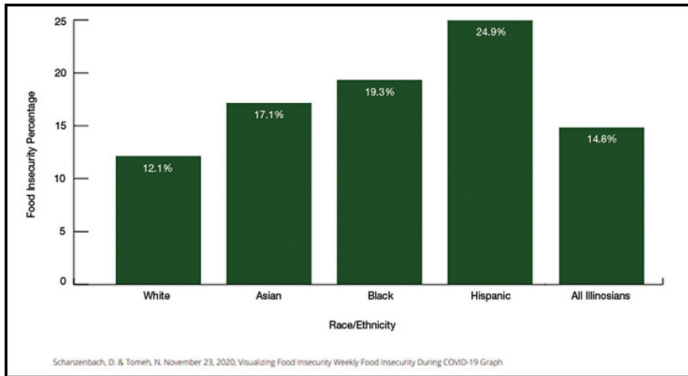
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different parts of the system, and the report brings us together. I am excited about the report and how it factored in different stakeholders at the table and lived experience.”

Commission members represent the work and perspectives of policy makers, academics, government officials, and charitable food systems.

The Greater Chicago Food Depository (GCFD) has been an important stakeholder in fighting hunger for 42 years, growing from six people with a vision to a network of more than 700 food pantries, soup kitchens, shelters, and programs in Chicago and Cook County. CEO Kate Maehr and Illinois Deputy Governor Sol Flores co-chair the Illinois Commission to End Hunger. Colleen Burns, GCFD’s state engagement and policy innovation lead, helped write the commission’s report.

“The roadmap lifts up knowledge,” Burns said. “We have the programs; we need better connection. There was hunger before the pandemic, and it disproportionately impacts communities of color; the pandemic exacerbated this. The roadmap says up front: We have to address root causes. The roadmap acknowledges there is a lot of work to be done—it’s a multi-year recommendation. Some recommendations are underway, and we can push across the finish line; some are more complex, and what we do now sets us up for success to have a solid foundation. We lift up ambitious goals so they are on the radar.”



Courtesy Illinois Commission to End Hunger

Food insecurity is higher than average among minorities and lower than average among whites.

Direct path

According to the report, “The fastest and most direct way to alleviate hunger is through the emergency food system and Federal nutrition assistance programs. Through food banks, pantries, shelters, and soup kitchens, the emergency food system provides groceries and meals to people in need. Federal nutrition programs like SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) and WIC (Women, Infants, and Children) provide groceries to low-income people, and programs targeting children and seniors provide nutritious meals and snacks in a variety of settings. Several Federal nutrition programs — including SNAP and meal programs for children — are entitlement programs, meaning they are funded to serve all who are eligible. All we have to do is enroll all who are eligible, and these programs will grow to meet the need. Unfortunately, many people who need food assistance do not utilize available programs. Some may not be aware that they are eligible or know how or be afraid to sign up; others face barriers to enrollment, or a program does not operate in their community.”

The report’s three-point approach to increase use of the current available food programs emphasizes:

Leveraging technology: Making it easier to enroll and stay enrolled in nutrition assistance programs by implementing (or simplifying) online application, enrollment, and participation, especially by smartphone, as phone technology is more accessible than desktop computers for many Illinois residents.

Harnessing innovation: Re-envisioning food assistance by piloting comprehensive strategies to improve access in underserved rural and urban areas and leveraging policy innovation in program delivery.

Strengthening collaboration: Working together to improve awareness of food assistance programs and ensure all doors lead to the programs people need.

Burns noted the pandemic illuminated the need to increase public-private partnerships, and the situation’s severity spurred a response that already created some new, nimble solutions.

“The State did an amazing job at a difficult time of getting benefits to people who needed benefits,” she said. Among the changes, Illinois approved the using SNAP for online grocery shopping and delivery during the pandemic. Walmart and Amazon joined the program first, with Aldi joining later; advocates for the food insecure hope for partnerships with more grocery retailers. The State created the temporary food benefit program Pandemic EBT to fund family

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food purchases for students qualifying for free and reduced-price school meals that became unavailable due to COVID-19. Also, the State has applied to the Federal government to make a demonstration project to simplify aid to seniors.

Advocates also envision a longer-term goal, requiring private sector investment, to create a website allowing citizens to enter basic personal data and learn all programs for which they are eligible in a seamless, one-stop system. Michigan has a similar successful system. Other public-private suggestions to increase access to fresh food include urban agriculture and farmers markets. Colonel Jennifer N. Pritzker, IL Army National Guard (retired), cousin of Illinois Governor JB Pritzker, recently announced a \$2 million pledge to GCFD in support of the Illinois Commission to End Hunger's priorities.

"The report spells out that it has been a year of crisis and immense loss, but partnership and collaboration are the silver linings for real hope to make meaningful gains to end hunger," said GCFD associate director of communications Greg Trotter. "Federal benefits expanded to help families nationally and in Cook County."

Federal food program benefits have direct community impact, which means that families who sign up for these programs can also help their neighborhood businesses while helping themselves. "Federal money is good for states, overall," Odoms-Young said. "When we remove barriers to the benefits, it's an economic development tool. It's a community multiplier—a support to retailers as well as the working poor."

Changing systems and policy

Odoms-Young emphasized that the roadmap report will affect Illinois citizens, including Chicago neighborhoods, by changing systems. "Policy and systems change makes it better for everyone," she said. "Long-time policy created structural oppression and segregation. The solution is rooted in system and policy change.

"It's creating new systems and structures to serve better, leveraging resources, accessing Federal food programs, and strengthening neighborhood-level fresh food at neighborhood stores—it's both/and," Odoms-Young stressed.

Hunter well knows the neighborhood needs of her 3rd District constituents and the importance of the community emergency food distribution partners and pantries acknowledged in the roadmap report. She has been onsite at several large-scale pandemic food distribution events, passing out boxes of supplies and listening to citizens used to giving now express their concern about receiving help due to pandemic distress. She has hired a pastor connected to many neighborhood food pantries to facilitate mass food distribution events and outreach.

"I put my social worker hat on and tell people where they can get more food later," Hunter said. "PPE? Food stamps? I tell them to call the district office and give them the number. We can get you hooked up, we can cut through the red tape to get the service you need. I try to explain programs like SNAP and WIC."

"These are Federal programs; your tax dollars go to this," Hunter said. "These are safety net programs; when in an emergency or crisis, these programs are there to catch you. People haven't thought about it that way. These programs are there to catch you before you hit the ground. You can call your alderman, your State rep, me—we know where the monies are; you call us. My job is to connect you with services. That's what we do.

"We know it's achievable," Hunter said of the commission's roadmap plan. "It takes persistence and leadership. We are up for the challenge to get it done."

Locally, Our Lady of the Holy Family Parish, 1334 W. Flournoy St., has a food pantry to help with hunger. Call (312) 243-7400, or log on to olhfchi.org. The University of Illinois Chicago has a Pop-Up Pantry to combat food insecurity among students. For summer 2021, it is located in the Student Center East Tower, Room 713, 750 S. Halsted St. The Pop-Up Pantry is run by UIC's Wellness Center. Donations of food, and volunteers, are welcome. Log on to wellnesscenter.uic.edu for more information, email wellnesscenter@uic.edu, or call (312) 413-2120.

Read the full Illinois Commission to End Hunger report at <https://tinyurl.com/r8mzyhfh> and the executive summary at <https://tinyurl.com/4wzwcw938>. See also endhungerillinois.org.

For the GCFD, log on to www.chicagosfoodbank.org. Email Burns at cburns@gcfd.org and Trotter at gtrotter@gcfd.org.

For Hunter, log on to www.senatorhunger.com or call (312) 949-1908. For Odoms-Young, email odmyoung@uic.edu.

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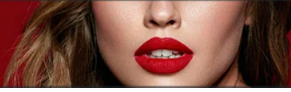
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