



**THE EFFECTS OF COVID-19 ON MICHIGAN
LOCAL FOOD COUNCILS AND THEIR
COMMUNITIES**

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Councils interviewed

Capital Area Food Council

Detroit Food Policy Council

Food Access Collaboration Team of Saginaw

Hunger-Free Calhoun County

Kent County Food Policy Council

Lake County Community Food Council

Local Food Alliance of Northern Michigan

Mackinac Local Food Council

North West Michigan Food and Farming Network

Oakland County Food Policy Council

Ottawa Food

Southwest Michigan Local Food Council

Thumb Food Policy Council

Upper Peninsula Food Exchange Policy Committee

Washtenaw County Food Policy Council

Western Michigan Food Recovery Collaborative

Western Upper Peninsula Food Systems Council

Wiisinidaa Mnomijim Community Coalition

Zoo City Food and Farm Network

The Effects of COVID-19 on Michigan Local Food Councils and Their Communities¹

Michigan was cast into the spotlight as COVID-19 began to spread across the country, ranking third nationally for the most COVID-19 related deaths just in the first few weeks of the pandemic. This prompted the first state of emergency on March 10, the closure of all K-12 schools on March 13, and the first stay-at-home order on March 24, which closed all non-essential businesses through the end of June.¹ Around the world, food insecurity has increased rapidly as a result of the pandemic, while food systems workers, businesses, and supply chains deemed “essential” have also been deeply impacted.² How have local food councils in Michigan responded to COVID-19, what has supported or challenged their attempts to adapt, and what will a post-pandemic “normal” mean for councils and their communities? This report, commissioned by the Michigan Local Food Council Network (MLFCN), begins to answer these questions based on a series of interviews carried out between July 22 and August 31, 2020 with leaders of 19 of Michigan’s local food councils.³

COVID-19 has had a major impact on over two-thirds of councils,⁴ forcing them to stop, shift, or delay work. While all councils now meet virtually, some

are meeting more or less frequently, or in one case, stopped meeting altogether. Nearly half (9) were in the middle of long-term strategic planning when the pandemic hit, which caused everything to be put on hold—in-person retreats, town halls, and community needs and food systems assessments. Many council members found it difficult to stay involved due to furloughs or emergency response duties in the food system or health care sectors.

Quote 1

“Everyone’s really experiencing pandemic fatigue or just trying to keep [their] head above water right now. So this whole motivation that we had to sort all these things out for the network and have all these lofty goals of ‘we’re going to create a new leadership structure and have a regional collective impact model’...just, the energy isn’t there anymore. There’s more pressing issues, frankly.”

- Food Council Member

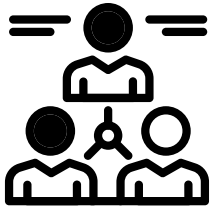
¹ States of emergency were in effect through October 31. On October 3, the Michigan Supreme Court ruled that the governor lacks the authority to declare states of emergency in relation to the pandemic: <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/10/03/919891538/michigan-supreme-court-rules-against-governors-emergency-powers>. Other data noted here come from the following articles and websites: <https://www.clickondetroit.com/news/local/2020/03/13/all-michigan-k-12-schools-to-close-due-to-coronavirus-concerns-officials-say/> and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/COVID-19_pandemic_in_Michigan

² See this report from the International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems: http://www.ipes-food.org/_img/upload/files/COVID-19_CommuniqueEN.pdf

³ Interviews were conducted over Zoom or by phone, lasted 30-45 minutes, and were recorded and transcribed. One occurred in early October. Two co-leads were interviewed from three councils and one each from other councils, for 22 interviews total. Another seven councils did not respond to interview requests, one declined because the new council was relatively inactive, and four older councils were not active.

⁴ Other councils were doing work that could continue (e.g., gardens) or that fit the needs that emerged (e.g., pantries).

New convenings



In addition to general council meetings, seven councils created separate meetings or joined newly formed groups, bringing together diverse stakeholders to discuss how to problem-solve issues emerging around the pandemic.

Various food councils that make up the UP Food Exchange, for instance, decided to hold “community check-ins” to learn about how councils could respond to the challenges growers were facing across Eastern, Central and Western UP, including the Wiisinidaa Mnomijim Community Coalition in Bay Mills Indian Community. Similar to how one council described these check-ins below, one UP Food Exchange representative described these convenings as a space for growers “to have a place to safely air their fears and their stressors and how they were getting through it and then as [the pandemic] moved forward...how are they adapting.”

Quote 2

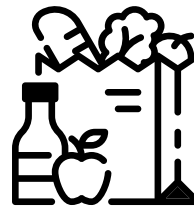
“We knew that we were feeling isolated. How do our farmers feel? ...Are they worried? Can we listen to them, can we respond to their needs immediately? So we set up a grower check-in. It started happening bi-weekly, meeting with all the growers throughout the Western UP. We also started a grower listserv to connect the growers together so they can also reach out to each other, not just through us.”

- Western UP Food System Collaborative

The Northwest Michigan Food and Farming Network similarly held “coffee chats” to discuss the direction of the Network, not as an “intensive collective impact model” that they had been working on pre-COVID, but to “keep the conversation about food systems going...about how we can further the conversation and assist members in our community while issues like supply chain management and local food system resilience are more in the public consciousness than they have been in a long time.” Ottawa Food joined a larger group of service providers in their county

to troubleshoot—first daily, then weekly, and now monthly. The Southwest Michigan Local Food Council, in collaboration with United Way, Feeding America, and a senior center, also held a one-time Zoom forum for the Berrien County Strategic Leadership Council, a group of local elected officials, major businesses, and other decision-makers who wanted to learn about ways they could respond to the growing issues with hunger in their county.

Food assistance



Many councils are located in communities where the food banks, food pantries, schools, and other community organizations mobilized quickly to meet an increased demand for emergency food, but in at least seven places, food councils

launched distribution sites or helped to expand these efforts. Three of these councils are coordinating major food deliveries and running food distribution sites and pantries. The Thumb Food Policy Council coordinator was asked by the local Emergency Operations Center to coordinate large-scale food distribution for the county. Another three councils set up systems to deliver emergency food to vulnerable populations who are homebound, including seniors and other immunocompromised individuals. The Food Access Collaboration Team of Saginaw set up their system through the local 211 helpline, supported by United Way, so people can call to have an emergency box of food delivered.

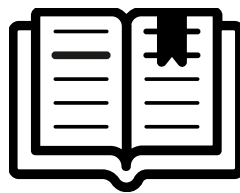
Hunger Free Calhoun’s delivery system offers fresh boxes and shelf-stable “emergency packs” that can last for four or five days for people without refrigeration. They had launched this program pre-COVID in collaboration with the local food bank for people who cannot come during the hours that food pantries are open. After the pandemic hit, they were able to quickly pivot to a contactless drive-through system at schools, senior centers, a homeless shelter, and rural sites. They also decided to be more strategic about which groups of people were in most need: “dialing down, instead of the mass ‘everybody needs food’ [approach]. What are the populations that are disproportionately affected right now that really don’t have access to food? Whether it’s transportation, whether there’s no pantry, whether they’re nervous to use a food bank, how do we get to those people?”

After focusing their efforts, numerous partnerships emerged, such as the Burma Center that works with refugees, migrant populations that might be afraid to go to food pantries because of their undocumented status; inner city low-income housing and rural locations where there are no pantries; as well as people who live in congregate homes who tested positive for COVID-19 and who are quarantined in hotels supported by several county governments. With their expanded delivery system, alongside new permanent and pop-up pantry sites, the Hunger Free Calhoun representative reported that they doubled the amount of food they delivered in the first seven months of 2020, over 1.7 million pounds (1.5 million meals), compared 884,000 pounds (over 737,000 meals) in the same time period in 2019.

Two councils also worked with local foundations to support new food assistance programs that purchase from local farmers. An idea for a collective CSA program emerged during the Western UP Food Systems Collaborative’s “grower check-ins.” The local Portage Health Foundation took the lead on funding and coordinating the project, which began in July with five farmers in two counties providing free boxes of produce for 20 families. Western UP Food System Collaborative members helped with food pickup and distribution. This program has now been approved for a 25% increase in 2021. Similarly, Ottawa Food helped

launch a community fundraising campaign, raising \$40,000 to start the Lakeshore Food Rescue Farmers Relief Fund, which purchases fresh produce from eight local growers and distributes it to food pantries in Ottawa County. Ottawa Food also hopes to expand this program as interest from growers has increased, including some who have donated food to local pantries out of support for the program. Others, like Lake County Community Food Council, shifted their food choice pantry—where people shopped for food—to an ordering system to reduce the number of people inside the pantry while maintaining people’s food preferences. Now, people come to the pantry, are given a list of available products to select from, and volunteers do the shopping while they wait. The Western UP Food System Collaborative also launched a mutual aid program based on the Plant a Row for the Hungry model (see Quote 3).

Timely guides



Five councils created guides for how to shop at farmers markets, join or work safely in community gardens, find farms selling direct, start home gardens, and locate pantries or mutual aid

projects in the region. For instance, multiple members of the Western UP Food Systems Collaborative wrote guides that addressed people seeking emergency food, community gardeners, the general public, and farmers market managers and vendors. They shared the guides through email, radio, United Way’s 211, universities, partner organization websites, and Copper Country Strong, a joint COVID-19 information system for the five western counties of the UP.⁵ They also posted the guides on the Collaborative’s blog, such as one on “Buying local: Please support local food providers this summer” written March 30, or “Best practices for community gardening during COVID-19” on April 19.⁶

Similarly, the UP Food Exchange farm directory—intended to help consumers purchase directly from local farms—was developed collaboratively through multiple partner organizations and was posted to the Exchange’s website⁷ and also distributed through a press release, partner organizations, and social media. The Northwest Michigan Food and Farming Network leadership team also worked with the Groundwork Center to develop a document⁸ that provides a “one-stop location where

Quote 3

“We wanted to...shift away from charity language... [to] people growing and sharing food with neighbors... Out of this grew a youth-led garden cooperative. People made their land available for youth to come in and establish gardens. That food [is then] gifted to the youth, but also to neighbors... That program was created without any money...but [we would like to] set up a stipend, or an honorarium for our youth, for them to garden during the summer and take care of our gardens regionally.”

- Western UP Food System Collaborative

⁵ See <https://coppercountrystrong.com/>

⁶ See <https://www.wupfoodsystems.com/blog>

⁷ See <https://upfoodexchange.com/farmdirectories/>

⁸ See https://docs.google.com/document/d/1MEtmGHCrnHyPt_p04uRUUV1Udcp6pt-C9yBgYode_2A/edit

you can find any services that are being provided to food organizations...[including] county, regional, and state resources; neighborhood support and social media groups; and innovative tool kits/templates.”

Alternatively, the guide created by the Food Access Collaboration Team of Saginaw (FACTS) was internal, used to coordinate emergency food distribution across numerous partners. The guide was developed after a group of approximately 30 community leaders gathered early in the pandemic to identify and address emerging needs across Saginaw County. FACTS took the lead in collecting pantry schedules and food offerings across the county to identify gaps and coordinate funding through the Community Foundation to help partners fill those gaps. One example of the guide’s utility was in helping United Way’s 211 connect people in need of food who were in quarantine, had health risks, or faced transportation issues to organizations that would purchase and deliver emergency food boxes. This internal guide also helped FACTS connect partners to fill in delivering food to families at school drop-off sites, after schools were no longer in session.

Lower barriers for urban gardening and other enabling legislation



Two councils supported efforts to change legislation to encourage more urban gardening and other government actions that can affect the local food supply. The

Zoo City Farm and Food Network, for instance, was granted variances by the Zoning Board of Appeals for the City of Kalamazoo to grow food on parcels that had not been zoned for agricultural use. The UP Food Exchange Policy Committee, even before

the pandemic, developed a guide to encourage local governments to be more proactive with decisions that affect the food supply, offering what they referred to as a “ready to go package” that includes steps for “collecting the information from their committee to enacting it in master plans and zoning...posted as a Word doc so that they can...adapt for their own communities.”

The UP Food Exchange representative noted a particular increase in “victory gardens” in the region, which they attributed, in part, to model zoning language that at least two communities had adopted prior to the pandemic, enabling the development of more gardens. Other communities across the UP also reached out to learn more about how to advocate for similar urban agriculture zoning changes.

Online ordering systems



Two councils helped local farmers set up online ordering systems. The Local Food Alliance of Northern Michigan worked with farmers markets to develop a system for pre-orders and online sales.

The UP Food Exchange (UPFE) helped Taste the Local Difference (TLD) develop a direct sales system modeled after their own. This helped avoid duplicate services already offered by UPFE and made it easier for farmers to use a system with which they were already familiar. The UPFE system is for institutional purchasers and restaurants to buy local food, and TLD’s system helps farmers sell products directly to consumers. Through their collaboration, TLD was able to enroll many farms that had resisted online sales until COVID-19 hit and also launched a major public education program indicating where people could buy local food. See one person’s explanation from UPFE below.

Quote 4

“There are a lot of tech-averse people here. They really prefer face to face. This has been very difficult for people. ...[A] number of farm stores and CSAs ...really took a leap forward with the [pandemic] situation... The more options that farms have, the more likely they are to make more sales. So having that experience with multiple platforms or avenues through which to sell things...will help people to be ready if there is another emergency.”

- UP Food Exchange

Raising funds for local groups



Ottawa Food joined a collaboration of partner agencies that started the Emergency Human Needs Fund. Contributions from foundations, businesses, and individuals provided over \$900,000 for 56 organizations throughout Ottawa County addressing food insecurity, homelessness, mental health needs, and other issues that emerged during the pandemic.

Figure 1. COVID-19 precautions flyer for independent grocers in Detroit



Support for independent grocers



In Detroit, where the vast majority of grocery stores are independently owned, the Detroit Food Policy Council (DFPC) worked with the Midwest Independent Retailers Association, the City of Detroit Department of Neighborhoods, and other partners (see flyer) to reach out to all independent grocery stores to offer signage, information on safety protocols, and personal protective equipment. DFPC's efforts allowed these stores to stay open and operate safely, while protecting the public's access to food.

Supportive state and local federal policies

In addition to actions that councils took, a variety of emergency funds or government policies and program adjustments were critical to helping their communities adapt to the pandemic. At the state level, two council leaders noted the role of 10 Cents a Meal⁹ in helping schools purchase local food. Another council leader noted that the Food Bank Council of Michigan used state-level Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) funds to purchase food from Meijer for seven of the state's major food banks; their local food bank also used county-level FEMA funds (through the Emergency Food and Shelter Program) to purchase food for local food pantries. The Wiisinidaa Mnomijim Community Coalition described how a locally adapted version of the Cottage Food Law—passed over a year ago to allow the sale of traditional processed foods not included in

the Michigan Cottage Food Law—has offered growers and families an extra source of income under the pandemic, especially as demand for these foods has increased. Four other interviewees each noted the importance of various executive orders and guidelines issued by Michigan's governor, the Department of Health and Human Services, and the Michigan Farmers Market Association (MIFMA), including one that allowed their government-embedded council to keep meeting virtually (through the Open Meetings Act) and other protections and guidance for keeping food businesses, farms and farmer's markets operating safely.

At the federal level (Table 1), eight council leaders noted the importance of COVID relief acts for increasing people's sources of income, whether

⁹ 10 Cents a Meal is "a state-funded program providing schools and early childhood education centers with match incentive funding up to 10 cents per meal to purchase and serve Michigan-grown fruits, vegetables, and legumes". For more detail see: <https://www.tencentsmichigan.org>

Table 1. Federal policies that supported food systems safety nets and protections

Income support through COVID relief acts	8
Increase benefits or relaxations in requirements to allow easier access to food assistance	14
Increases to SNAP benefits	10
Pandemic EBT for families with children eligible for Free & Reduced School Meals	8
Waivers to distribute school-based meals and to relax summer food programs rules	6
USDA food box programs	5
USDA relaxed procedures for food assistance	5
Dropping the \$20 Double Up Food Bucks cap	3
Increased WIC (Women, Infants and Children) benefits	2
Increased incentives for charitable giving	1

through increased unemployment benefits, stimulus checks, paid leave, higher pay for frontline workers, or the Payroll Protection Program, which helped small businesses keep employees on the payroll.

Nearly all interviewees (14) also discussed a variety of expanded federal food assistance programs that have been vital. This includes 10 people who highlighted the additional SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) benefits for participants who were not yet receiving the maximum amount, and eight who mentioned Pandemic Electronic Benefits Transfer (P-EBT), temporary federal nutrition assistance benefits loaded on EBT cards that are used to purchase food, provided to families with children eligible for Free and Reduced Price School Meals. Like others, the UP Food Exchange representative observed that more people were using their SNAP Bridge Cards at farmers markets this year, and that at least half of Bridge Card users were using P-EBT. Several interviewees also commented that the option¹⁰ to drop the \$20 cap on the use of Double Up Food Bucks has increased people's use of SNAP at farmers markets.



Six council leaders discussed the importance of federal rules that allowed schools to distribute food they would have normally served children, and the flexibility that was extended for the summer meal programs, such as:

waving eligibility requirements to allow any school to feed any child, not requiring congregate meals on-site, allowing parents to pick up food without having their children with them, and offering multiple days-worth of food at once. Five council leaders also pointed out how important it was that USDA relaxed many of the participant data collection processes, as a council leader from Hunger Free Calhoun described:

Normally pre-COVID, you had to get a name, a signature, an address, a zip code, how many live in the household, etc. Now during COVID, the government isn't requiring quite so much on their USDA, TEFAP, CFAP¹¹ and CARES Act and everything else... We have tons of new families that have never had to use the food bank or food pantry or fresh food distribution site to get food and it's just made it easier. It's more welcoming. It's a quicker process.

- Hunger Free Calhoun

Five councils additionally spoke about the impact of the USDA Farmers to Families Food Box Program for addressing food insecurity (see Quote 5).

Finally, two people mentioned the importance of increased WIC benefits, and one person noted that it was useful that the charitable giving threshold,¹² as part of the national CARES (Coronavirus Aid, Relief, Economic Security) Act, was lowered, encouraging more donations to food banks.

¹⁰ See changes to Double Up Food Bucks limits that stores and farmers markets are implementing in response to COVID-19, including getting rid of the limit altogether or in some cases, increasing the limit to \$50/day: <https://www.doubleupfoodbucks.org/resources/covid-19/>

¹¹ USDA stands for United States Department of Agriculture, TEFAP is the The Emergency Food Assistance Program, and CFAP is the Coronavirus Food Assistance Program.

¹² See more about how the CARES Act changed charitable giving thresholds: <https://www.cafamerica.org/cares-act-impacts-giving/>

Quote 5

“One [USDA program] that I think has been phenomenal and needs to continue is the Farmers to Families Program... [The government] hit the mark because they obviously were buying produce from farmers and they were taking responsibility financially for distribution and then the locals distribute... It allowed us to use fewer volunteers because everything was prepackaged... You get three boxes...delivered curbside... It's probably about a 20 pound box including potatoes, apples, celery, cucumbers, onions, different fruits. Sometimes it's been strawberries, blueberries...great stuff. And then you get a dairy box that has two gallons of milk, four pints of milk, two white and two strawberry. And then cottage cheese, sour cream, chip dip... And then the meat box, that just started to happen in the last three weeks, could be anything from a box of frozen chicken strips to a pulled pork package, it's probably a five to 10 pound box. So it's not small. So you're getting three boxes and none of it has to be loaded off a truck and put back into anything else, we just put the pallets on the ground and line people up and deliver...”

- Thumb Food Policy Council

Taken together, these state and federal responses have been crucial for addressing the growing levels of food insecurity in Michigan. In the 10-county area around Traverse City that the Northwest Michigan Food and Farming Network serves, the representative noted that pantry numbers went down in most places, and that a survey that she helped conduct based on 300 responses found that the majority of people were using their stimulus check to purchase food. In her perspective, “Pandemic EBT, the increase in unemployment benefits and the stimulus check in a relatively low cost of living area with the high tourist economy...provide a pretty significant relief.” In other places, like Washtenaw County, the local food bank has seen a “dramatic increase in demand,” but, as one

council member there noted “I don't think we would have been able to meet demand if it weren't for these additional federal resources. They've been extremely crucial.” One lesson two interviewees learned is that having these federal supports has been key, but so has been the rapid response of the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services to apply for every waiver that the USDA has made available such as Pandemic EBT and school meal waivers. As one member of the Detroit Food Policy Council noted, “I remember hearing horror stories of pandemic EBT in other states... It's been handled extremely smoothly in Michigan and we were one of the first states to get the waiver. I remember reading in June and July [that some] states were still stumbling over it.”

Problematic policies or gaps

There was less consensus about policies or gaps in policies that challenged the ability of councils or their communities to respond to the pandemic. Six councils, however, agreed that one issue was the limited ability to use SNAP EBT cards for online orders or food delivery. Currently in most states, people are limited to using SNAP for online purchases at Walmart or Amazon, which leaves behind small and mid-sized farms and food retailers. It also means that low-income households are forced to leave their home to find food when they cannot rely on food delivery (see Quote 6).

Quote 6

“When you say ‘shelter in place; you can order your food’...with GPS [analysis] you can see that there was more movement in areas where there were less services...[forcing people] to go out and get food from places like pantries or...the school... You know that all of those were exposures that maybe if [households] were better resourced, they wouldn't have had to take.”

- Detroit Food Policy Council

Seven council leaders also noted gaps in policies that do not address the root causes of food insecurity, such as structural racism, the lack of livable wages, unaffordable childcare, unaffordable housing (or a rent moratorium that did not last long enough), lack of affordable healthcare, inadequate transportation to get people to available food assistance and other services. Two councils each also mentioned that rural internet connectivity has been a major barrier for obsolete farmers market EBT machines and for holding virtual meetings. Many households in the Bay Mills Indian Community, for instance, have only “a step above dial up,” and even in locations with “good internet” the Wiisinidaa Mnomijim Community Coalition representative noted how “sometimes the internet is so overloaded, you can’t even do a Zoom meeting.” Two councils also found it difficult to access federal resources. For instance, someone from the recently formed Zoo City Farm and Food Network described how:

We need the ability to be able to develop sustainable food systems—specifically Black-led sustainable food systems... The relief efforts that are being disseminated and the resources that are being allocated are not being specifically targeted to us... Black-led initiatives need to be prioritized right now, period. Across the board. ...We need to be leading our own initiatives. “The people closest to the pain should be the closest to the power,” as Congresswoman Ayanna Pressley said.

- Zoo City Farm and Food Network

Another two council leaders explained how SNAP benefits still needed further reform, such as increased benefits in high cost of living areas; elimination of the three-month cap and work requirement when a county’s or state’s unemployment rates are low, making work hard to find; and increased benefits for those most in need who already receive the maximum. The Washtenaw Food Policy Council representative who works for the local food bank also explained that too many people in need still do not qualify: “We estimate up to 40% of the people who experienced food insecurity in our county are ineligible for SNAP because they make too much money, but they don’t have enough money for food. And so there’s been no kind of flexibility or expanding who is eligible for SNAP during the pandemic.”

Other challenges mentioned by individuals included the time it takes to follow cleaning guidelines at farmers markets and the lack of community kitchens in one region (for people cooking meals for others or interested in selling value added goods). One county is also in need of more farmers markets that accept EBT and grocery stores that accept Double Up Food Bucks. A council member in another community was also frustrated by the number and location of food pickup sites when schools shifted to the Unanticipated School Closure Summer Food Service Program in March. Meals were distributed at far fewer sites than there are schools, which made it more difficult for people to take advantage of that resource and for providers to connect with people who were in need of additional food assistance. Finally, in at least one case, the quick roll out of the USDA food box program created “unforeseen complications” that suggests a need for adjustments, as explained in Quote 7 below.

Quote 7

“A lot of organizations stepped up and said, ‘Oh, yeah, we could take 1,000 boxes,’ without really calculating the larger need. And now we have a surplus. I think we have 67 pallets of frozen food that have come through the USDA program that are now being stored in cold storage that we didn’t have prior to the pandemic, because who would have thought we needed to store 67 pallets of pork ragu that’s already pre mixed into pasta sauce? ...I think I did the math right in saying that if 75% of all of the meal sites in the 10-county region served this for 140 days straight we would have enough food.”

- Northwest Michigan Food and Farming Network

Partnerships and networks that supported councils

Councils have relied on a variety of partnerships to respond to the pandemic—most that were already established, many that were strengthened, and some newly formed. Many partners are unique to each council, reflecting the institutional contexts they operate within (see Box 1). Some of the common types of partners included local health departments (6 councils), MSU Extension (5), other MLFCN councils (4), and local public schools (4). Two or three interviewees also mentioned working closely with their farmers markets and MIFMA, food banks, their local county executive or county commissioners office, their local United Way office, and the county Emergency Operations Center. Having many of these relationships already in place was crucial, as the Western UP Food System Collaborative representative noted, “Over the last two years we’ve been building relationships with all of these different sectors. And so when the pandemic hit, it was very easy for us to get on a call together and start planning. And that was really, really helpful. If we didn’t have that, then how would we do all this?”

Many of these partnerships were built into the councils themselves through their membership, making it easy to quickly look through a systems lens at how the pandemic was having an effect on their community. As the Northwest Michigan Food and Farming Network representative noted, “The network itself was a helpful organization, just because there was some reason for a varied group of organizations and individuals to come together and sit around a table early on in the pandemic... We would just be like, ‘Wow, what are you seeing in food systems?’ and have 12 people on a call and talking about different elements of the work. That in and of itself, that connection was really helpful.” Others described how their existing relationships opened up opportunities to quickly deploy emergency food distribution sites (see Quote 8 on next page).

The Detroit Food Policy Council also described how having pre-established relationships with a grocery store coalition and many other partners allowed them to transition to quickly help independent grocery stores keep operating safely:

Forming new relationships when you’re already busy and stressed is not ideal... One of the biggest lessons is just the importance of having networks, of working collaboratively and having those trusted relationships already in place. I think we don’t value that enough, those organizations like ourselves and other policy councils that are those containers and those touch points where people who work in different areas can connect with one another... so that at a time of crisis or a time of need people have a place to go to work with others, or to ask for help and be connected with help.

- Detroit Food Policy Council

Box 1. Key council partners

- Local health department (6 councils)
- MSU Extension (5)
- Other councils in the MLFCN network (4)
- Local public schools (4)
- Farmers markets and MIFMA (3)
- Food banks (3)
- County Executive/Commissioners Office (2)
- United Way (2)
- Local Emergency Operations Centers (2)
- African American Health Institute (1)
- Groundwork Center (1)
- Chamber of Commerce (1)
- City of Detroit Department of Neighborhoods (1)
- City of Detroit Office of Sustainability (1)
- Community Foundation (1)
- Eastern UP Food Hub (1)
- Kent Council Essential Needs Task Force (1)
- MI Works! (1)
- MI Department of Education (1)
- Midwest Independent Retailers Association (1)
- Rotary chapter (1)
- Taste the Local Difference (1)
- Hispanic center (1)
- Local farmers (1)
- Local community college (1)
- Migrant organizations (1)
- Regional government planning office (1)
- Senior centers (1)

Quote 8

“The Emergency Operations Center has been a brand new partnership. They didn’t know what the Thumb Food Policy Council or MSU Extension did. We’re very nimble. When they called and said, ‘Hey, we need somebody to coordinate a large food distribution,’ I said, ‘I’m your man.’ ...It only happened because of the relationship I had with the health department [representative] who serves on the Emergency Operations Center....Also the public schools. We’ve used their parking lots to stage food giveaways. And not just in St. Clair County, but in other parts. Case in point, I delivered food last Friday to Bad Axe High School. And they had kids and adults there ready to unpack the truck and distribute... I’ve been around for a long time and I’ve developed a lot of relationships. When it’s time to ‘take advantage’ of those relationships in terms of delivery, you make it happen. I literally called those people Thursday and said, ‘I got 350 boxes of food and I’ll bring milk. Find a place for me to get rid of it.’ And they took care of it in 30 minutes...And there were 4-H kids up there, they just blew it away. They unpack this truck in 30 minutes...They know what they’re doing and they know what a team is all about. I mean it was just, it was incredible.”

- Thumb Food Policy Council

MLFCN support now and moving forward

Nearly all interviewees (17) agreed that the MLFCN supported their ability to respond to the pandemic in some way (Table 2). Two people were relatively unfamiliar with MLFCN and were not active in the Network. For those that are active, 13 described how MLFCN helps their councils stay up to date on what is happening in the food system statewide, get guidance, and learn what other councils are doing, and nine people see MLFCN as an important gathering place where they can network, actively learn together and “troubleshoot” with other councils. As one person explained:

It’s just nice bringing together all the people that they do and having those resources. We had heard from some of our partners, some issues they were having with their SNAP benefits. I would bring that to the council [Network] and the right people were there to help and tell me what probably was happening and say, “If you keep hearing about this, let me know and I will connect you to your local office so that you can make a formal complaint and get this rectified.”

- Oakland County Food Policy Council

Another seven people specifically pointed out how much they appreciate the state and federal

policy updates they receive during the MLFCN meetings. Hearing these during the meetings is especially valuable, one person pointed out, for the “interpretation” that’s also provided, which helps them understand more clearly the implications of certain legislation for their own work: “A lot of times, I find that the policies that really impact our work are not policies that the general public cares about. So there’s not great news coverage. You get a new brief or a policy brief, but there’s no analysis and it’s just like, “here’s what we did.” So I think that [MLFCN] really helps bridge that gap, that’s super beneficial...” Many also mentioned that they appreciate the regular digests MLFCN sends over email, summarizing information in one place: “Something was coming out every day, everything was moving so fast, so it was nice that...I would just go to one place instead of trying to look around everywhere.” Many share this information in their own newsletters. As one person explained, “Because of [MLFCN] we were able to get resources out to the public so much faster...We usually send [our newsletter] out monthly but we increased it to weekly during the quarantine with all the information that was available. [The MLFCN] really gave us a direct line into what was happening and what was available at the state or federal level.”

Seven interviewees also noted the virtual learning opportunities, webinars, grants available and the MLFCN-sponsored trainings and learning cohorts, like a recent fund development cohort MLFCN sponsored. In particular, some council leaders described how the trainings sponsored by the Network prepared them better to respond to this crisis, as one person explained:

We were always receiving [state] budget updates and information about programs and resources and things that were going on. So, me being involved in that Network has really allowed us to be more effective and more efficient, even before COVID started, as a council. I've been part of some of their different learning cohorts and right now I'm participating in the fund development. In the long run, that helps us when we get in situations like this, too, because then we could potentially have access to more funding than we would have if we wouldn't have learned those skills. So overall, it's been a great resource before and during the pandemic.

- Ottawa Food

Three council representatives additionally indicated that the mini-grants MLFCN has sponsored had been important for projects they carried out during the pandemic and individual councils also noted that the Network has been an important place to discuss and mobilize around food policy advocacy and to find others to coordinate around COVID-related grant opportunities.

Asked what kind of support or activities MLFCN could focus on going forward, the majority (12 councils) want MLFCN to continue doing what the Network has always done: offering a place for councils to network and learn from one another (9); sharing information

about statewide trends, what other councils are doing, and legislative updates (6); informing them of resources and training opportunities (3); and helping councils apply a racial equity lens (1) (see Table 3).

Even though a majority appreciated the increased frequency and content of the MLFCN meetings, especially during the early part of the pandemic, three interviewees expressed that they eventually stopped attending as often because they felt like they had “other competing things for space and time” and wanted meetings to be more focused. Two people suggested introducing “stories of success” or best practices, what one person thought could be accomplished by highlighting one council every month, to hear the specifics of what some councils are doing. Two others suggested that monthly meetings could occasionally offer breakout rooms or other ways to “learn from others to drive forward big things our council is working on right now,” like building local agritourism, addressing land access, or developing a regional food brand, rather than always focusing on emergency food, which they felt most of the larger meetings have focused on. One person also suggested hosting a forum with state-elected officials to talk about state-level issues.

Several interviewees would like MLFCN's help accessing federal or foundation grants. One person suggested seeking funding for a “collective action” project with multiple councils. Two interviewees also think MLFCN could help raise the visibility of food councils, so that more people get involved and more local governments seek out councils as food systems change agents. One person thinks this could be done if the Network held a meeting in her town, while another person described how:

The reason food banks and pantries are so familiar, even though they started at around the same time as food policy councils, is because there's been an awareness raising... There's never been awareness raising on a large scale about food policy councils. So unless you are doing food system work, you generally don't even know what they do... We find these people who will be our natural allies, but they don't know we exist until we can do the one-on-one or happen to run into them or present at their organization. As a small entity it would be more effective if there was some kind of media campaign like Feeding America has on food pantries...awareness raising that these organizations working on systemic issues all across the country exist, how to connect

Table 2. Ways the MLFCN supported councils in responding to COVID-19

Updates on statewide trends and what other councils are doing	13
Networking opportunities and co-learning	9
Federal and state legislative updates	7
Sharing about resources and training/learning opportunities	7
Mini-grant support during COVID	3
Space to discuss how to mobilize food policy advocacy	1
Place to find partners for COVID grants	1

with them and what kind of help we can provide... It would just make our work a lot easier if people knew we existed.

- Detroit Food Policy Council

Individual interviewees also suggested that the MLFCN could help them learn how to do health policy advocacy (separate from advocacy focused on food access), work more intentionally with Native American communities, identify and help councils connect to Black-led food systems groups around the state, and produce reports about different county/regional food systems. One person also wondered if MLFCN could help bridge policy advocacy work with programmatic work:

It's very easy to see work as either policy advocacy on one end of the spectrum and programmatic on the other, seeing these two things related but very disconnected. You either do one or the other. ...I wonder if there's a better [way to] bridge that chasm between knocking on your legislator's door and handing out food out of a food pantry.

- Oakland County Food Policy Council

Finally, one council leader would also like to see multi-year grants rather than year-long project grants, to allow them time to do more capacity building. As they put it,

This pandemic has really highlighted how much we want to do [work] internally and how we want to slow down and make sure that our foundations are coming from a good place... It's easier for us to write program grants like through MDARD...but getting capacity funding, general funding is really difficult.

- Western Upper Peninsula Food Systems Council

Table 3. Support MLFCN can offer going forward

Continue doing what the Network has always done	12
Offer networking opportunities and a co-learning space	9
Share statewide trends, legislative updates, and council activities	6
Inform about resources and training/learning opportunities	3
Help councils apply a racial equity lens	1
Help groups of councils apply for large grants around a shared project	3
Offer more topic-specific meetings	3
Build capacity to change food systems-related health policy	1
Do more intentional work with Native American communities	1
Help councils bridge policy advocacy work with programmatic work	1
Identify and help connect Black-led food systems work in Michigan	1
Offer multi-year capacity building grants (not just project grants)	1
Produce reports of different county/regional food systems	1
Support a public awareness media campaign about food councils	1

Post-pandemic: Lessons and opportunities

As Michigan, and the world, looks towards emerging from the pandemic, council leaders were asked to reflect on what a post-COVID world would ideally look like. Asked first about policies or programs that were established or modified during the pandemic that should continue, most (11 interviewees) hoped that policy changes that lowered barriers to food assistance remain in place, especially increased SNAP benefits (7), relaxed procedures for accessing USDA food assistance (5), the USDA food box programs (4), waivers to distribute school-based meals and relax summer food program rules (3), Pandemic EBT (1) and not requiring a Double Up Food Bucks cap (1) (Table 4). Others hope that what remains are the income safety nets that were established through COVID relief acts (4), policies and funding that support pantry purchases from local farms (1), and incentives to increase charitable giving (1).

Similar to the relationships councils had already formed, when asked what relationships they lacked that might have made it easier for them to respond to the pandemic—and relationships they want to form moving forward—answers varied widely (see Box 2). Among the more common answers were desires to form stronger connections to local government leaders (5), local foundations (4), local schools (4), the faith based community (3), grocery and food distribution actors (3), the local health care system (3), and local farms (3). For the Capital Area Food Council in Lansing, COVID-19 as it intersected with the Black Lives

Matter movement has made council members reflect about the need to branch out to less obvious partners outside of the food system. As they describe below:

Quote 9

“We realized less as a result of COVID and more just an awareness of the organizations doing advocacy work around Black Lives Matter and systemic racism, that our food council lacks relationships with organizations that are not explicitly doing food work, but that work with concerns of food insecure communities. That’s one area where we’ve talked a lot about needing to build partnerships... We’ve got a lot of great organizations in Lansing organizing around police brutality, around systemic racism. Ingham County Health Department just declared racism as a public health issue. A lot of those organizations are focused on immediate needs of their constituents, which is to help them avoid being murdered and might not currently be focusing on food, but my question is, how do we build partnerships so that if they decide they want to focus on that, or they see us as a resource [we are] able to support that in some way?”

- Capital Area Food Council

Table 4. Policies that should continue post COVID-19

Increased benefits or relaxations to allow for easier access to food assistance	11
Increases to SNAP benefits	7
TEFAP/USDA relaxed procedures to access food assistance	5
USDA food box programs	4
Waivers to distribute school-based meals and to relax summer food programs rules	3
Pandemic EBT for families with children eligible for Free & Reduced School Meals	1
Dropping the \$20 cap for Double Up Food Bucks	1
Income support through COVID relief acts	4
Policies and funding that support pantry purchases from local farms	1
Increased incentives for charitable giving	1

As a final question, interviewees were asked whether they saw opportunities emerging from the pandemic, both direct and broader societal shifts that could support their work (Table 5).

Several interviewees noted the direct benefit of more time for strategic planning, to “think outside the box,” and to work more holistically. As one council put it, “I think a lot of our partners are programmatically very strong, and I think this has illuminated how we all fit into a bigger picture and I’m hopeful that that will help us all work more effectively together, not only programmatically, but to think about how we can affect some systems-level change to better support people overall in a more proactive way.” For another interviewee, the pandemic has increased the urgency of their council’s work and its relevance to the broader public. One council also noted how the pandemic “shines a light on populations that are underserved,” helping them see more clearly and reach groups especially in need of food assistance. Other individuals also noted that the pandemic is bringing farmers together to collaborate more; is creating interest among entrepreneurs to develop shared resources, like a community kitchen; and is increasing funding from foundations focused on food work.

For many, the pandemic has also raised considerable public awareness that they hope to leverage. One council leader sees the pandemic as an opportunity to raise awareness and better practices around food safety, and two leaders believe this could be a moment to capitalize more on people’s heightened awareness around health and the benefits of local, nutritious food. The most common revelation six council leaders saw in the broader public was that the conventional food system—based on long supply chains, concentrated feed lots, and consolidation—is fragile, raising interest in building more resilient local and regional food systems. As one person put it,

I think the public awareness of how unstable and how vulnerable our national, conventional food system is a big help. ...All of a sudden people are saying “What, there’s no food in the grocery store?” We’re hearing news reports about these large food processing plants that are being shut down because of COVID-19 outbreaks. I think there’s a lot of interest and a heightened awareness of locally grown food. If we can take advantage of that and build on it then it would be a good thing.

- Local Food Alliance of Northern Michigan

Box 2. Partnerships councils want to form

- Local government (5)
- Local foundations (4)
- Local schools (4)
- Faith based community (3)
- Farms (3)
- Grocery chain and food distribution actors (3)
- Local healthcare system (3)
- Food workers and farm workers (2)
- Indigenous groups (2)
- Low income people who need services (2)
- Agriculture and nutrition educators (1)
- Cross-sectional groups to work on systemic racism (1)
- Food business community (1)
- Homeless and women’s shelters (1)
- Latino community (1)
- Other Black urban agriculture growers (1)
- Small food pantries (1)
- State government (1)
- United Way (1)
- Youth who are tech savvy (1)

For four councils, the dramatic rise in food assistance donations and programs has made them question the charitable food model. Despite his enthusiasm for the USDA food boxes, the representative from the Thumb Food Policy Council said that if these box programs continue, he would want to “be careful to make sure I’m looking at what other policy might be behind the pre-packaged boxes... Families that are getting that now obviously need it, but at the same time, they should be able to go into a grocery store and buy what they want, just like you and I do.” Similarly, the Kent County Food Policy Council interviewee has grown concerned that “charitable food is very normalized in our community,” so the council is actively “working on how we change that narrative around food justice so that we’re not coming out of the pandemic with just more perpetuated systems of caregiving...so that people have more autonomy and more decision making in how they access food.” The interviewee would like people on SNAP to receive wrap-around services, “so that people can move to a situation where they don’t need SNAP anymore.” The council hopes to build relationships with local restaurant owners, grocery store operators and food production companies to advocate for higher wages and benefits, to “help heighten awareness around why people end up in need so quickly...and to ensure that those

Table 5. Opportunities emerging from the pandemic

Direct opportunities to advance council work	
Offering council time for strategic planning and building systemic partnerships	3
Sharpening urgency and relevancy of council's work	1
Revealing underserved populations most in need of food assistance	1
Offering more opportunities for farmers to collaborate	1
Creating interest in shared community resources (e.g., community kitchen)	1
Increasing funding for local food system work	1
Broader societal shifts that could support council work	
Rethinking the conventional food system and the need to strengthen local systems	6
Raising awareness of systemic inequities and food justice	5
Sparking conversations about the charity food model	4
Helping people realize that food insecurity is widespread, including rural areas	3
Promoting healthier lifestyles and diets	2
Raising food safety awareness	1

people who are working on food-related industries aren't the same...[that] have to go to a food pantry... because they're not getting paid enough to purchase enough food for their family." The representative of the Detroit Food Policy Council also described the issue as needing to get to the root causes of food insecurity:

People don't think systems-wide or systems change when they think about food. They always go to, 'Let's hand out some food,' which is completely needed, but then nobody goes to the next thing to think about, Why is there so much need? And why is this needed? The systems change. ... I think people are starting to get there, but it's still not where it needs to be. ... Our community, our society is just really focused on charity impact work and not digging in and get into root causes and really making systemic changes. ...We're hoping to work on policies where less people will be reliant on food pantries for emergencies.

- Detroit Food Policy Council

Five council leaders also see the pandemic as an opportunity to raise greater awareness around food systems inequities, whether around frontline workers in the supply chain or how issues like food security are intimately connected to issues of poverty and

racism. One council representative, for instance, felt that the pandemic showed the critical need to shift legislation and investments—particularly in support of Black communities and Black-led initiatives—to not just tweak existing systems, but to distribute resources more equitably and ultimately, build food sovereignty. They described how the “processes of access” need to change, explaining how:

The established supply chain and resource distribution channels do not account for food sovereignty which is important to neighborhoods and people that are disproportionately at risk for food insecurity. The establishment of organizing bodies and growing spaces is imperative for bridging those gaps...[along with] the autonomy to serve immediate needs that emerge in a crisis.

- Zoo City Farm and Food Network

A second council leader explained: “In talking about income and talking about health care and structural racism I think there's already more of a conversation around how those feed into one another.” Another person also felt like the pandemic was helping people to learn “the difference between assets and income—and the need for assets to weather a crisis, and...how important food is and how relevant it is to everything.”

Conclusion

COVID-19 has clearly upended but also heightened the need for local food councils in Michigan. The network weaving function councils have long played helped many pivot quickly and spring into action with other partners. The MLFCN has played a critical role in helping councils learn from one another during this time and keeping them up to date on constant shifts in state and federal policies. Alongside the many innovative programs councils have implemented, they also agreed that government support systems have been vital to staving off the worst of food insecurity that has risen across the state. One representative from Hunger Free Calhoun reflected a common sentiment that such vital social safety nets should remain in place:

During COVID, they say this is an emergency, but a lot of the folks who are needing a food bank, their daily life is an emergency. Right? And so we are removing barriers. That's what these policies all did—removed barriers. Why are we putting the barriers back up?

- Hunger-Free Calhoun County

The desperate situation that communities, businesses, and households find themselves in is also spurring other councils to reflect on what a post-COVID world should bring and the long-term work they want to pursue. For many, this time is strengthening their conviction to be bold when it comes to tackling the root causes of food issues from a truly systemic and equity lens (see Quote 10).

Quote 10

“The biggest lesson...is that we shouldn't hold back in the language that we use about some of the higher-level issues... We're in a situation where we can't dance around things...if we're going to be able to make change. We've spent many years being nice about issues like racism and wages and health care and we need to be much more direct about things now.”

- Kent County Food Policy Council

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