



Statement for the Record  
Committee on Rules, U.S. House of Representatives

April 1, 2022

**The Role of Food Assistance Organizations in  
Ending Hunger in America**

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Chairman McGovern, Ranking Member Cole, and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to share my perspective on some of the challenges and opportunities to end hunger in America and the key role that food assistance organizations can play. My name is Jackie DeCarlo, and I am the Chief Executive Officer of Manna Food Center (Manna), the designated food bank for Montgomery County, Maryland.

My team and I have the honor of meeting and talking daily with people who come to Manna for food and other support. The neighbors we hear from reflect the rich racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity that defines our county, and they have achieved all levels of education and work experience. What unites them is that they have all experienced job loss or other economic strain due to illness, a change in family circumstances, or simply, the challenge of paying for decent housing, healthcare, nutritious food, and other essentials while juggling low wage jobs or living on a senior's fixed income.

I hope that by sharing some of what Manna has learned and how we are collaborating with our partners, we can contribute to the conversation about the important role food assistance organizations can play in the fight against hunger and encourage Congress to support policies and funding that will help organizations like Manna do what we do even better, and for more people who need our support.

**COVID Pandemic: Adaptation & Innovation to Meet Increased Demand**

Here in Montgomery County, the [median household income is \\$111,812](#), making it one of the wealthiest counties in the country. And yet, to support a family in this expensive part of the nation, a parent with an infant and a school-aged child needs a full-time job that [pays \\$40.99 per hour](#). In our county, one out of three elementary school students qualify for Free and Reduced Meals (FARMs), and 20% of seniors live below the [self-sufficiency standard](#).

The COVID pandemic exposed how close so many Americans are from making tough choices like whether to pay rent or buy food to feed their families. When the pandemic hit, demand for food from Manna grew by more than 40%, and thousands of people came to us for food support for the first time as the economy shut down and they themselves or family members lost jobs. I was struck by a note we received from a single mom in Chevy Chase, one of the county's most affluent communities. She wrote:

*"I am forever grateful to each of you for your continued support of my family. I am getting myself back on my feet and hope to soon write that I do not need your assistance anymore—my goal is by this autumn. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for your service to those who are in such an awkward stage. Having your support is how I made it through this past year."*

Backed by the support of our County, State, and Federal governments, and our generous community of foundation, corporate, and individual donors, Manna was able to adapt and innovate to meet the increased demand for food while operating safely and effectively in the context of a deadly pandemic. We developed new and better ways to work that will last well beyond this pandemic.

#### Overcoming Transportation Barriers

Manna strives to listen to and address the needs of the community members we support, in both our daily interactions and through an annual survey. We have long understood that lack of transportation is a big barrier to many people who need food support. In fact, just before the pandemic, Manna had opened a new center along a popular bus route in East County, where transportation and economic barriers are the greatest.

When the pandemic hit, we started making home deliveries so that our most vulnerable neighbors could stay safely at home. We tapped dozens of volunteer drivers who normally serve as our [Community Food Rescue](#) program "food runners," picking up rescued food from farms and other food businesses and delivering it to food assistance organizations. We also piloted a program offering free one-way and round-trip ride-share transportation for single parents and others who had a tough time getting to and from our drive-through distributions during the pandemic.

Based on the incredible response to these services – and made possible by our generous community of donors – Manna now has a dedicated delivery truck and driver to staff a permanent home delivery service for seniors and disabled members of our community who face transportation challenges. And our free ride-share program is continuing beyond the pilot phase.

### *Creating a Food Purchasing Hub*

Manna has always partnered with other local food assistance groups, and when COVID hit, we had new opportunities to offer food, including produce, at bulk-purchase rates. In our most recent fiscal year, we distributed 61% more food directly and through 19 faith-based and community organization partners and seven service hubs established in response to COVID-19. As a member of the Montgomery County Food Security Task Force, we are working hard to create strategies that will achieve our vision of Food for All during the long economic recovery ahead.

### *Supporting Students during Remote Learning*

When schools closed in March 2020, Manna transformed our school-based Weekend Bag program partnership with Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS). Every week, we packed school buses with grab-and-go food bags, and buses dispersed across the county to serve school children and their families. We distributed hundreds of thousands of food bags while students were learning remotely, and we are happy to be back in the school buildings now that they are open again.

### *Engaging Communities through Trusted Partnerships*

As the severity of the pandemic became clearer, Manna knew that many communities that previously had not needed our help may be uniquely hurting due to COVID-19 and that stigma, fear, language barriers, and lack of trust were already keeping some people from reaching out to ask for help. Manna sought the support of six trusted community organizations that could connect us with residents who were disproportionately affected by the pandemic in communities of African immigrant, African American, Caribbean, and Latino/a residents. We provide financial resources so partners can hire community outreach workers to reach deep into neighborhoods. These partnerships have connected thousands of people to Manna services, and we could not have reached them on our own.

### **Providing Food: Essential but Not Sufficient**

We all know that nutritious food is vitally important for health and education outcomes, so the work of food assistance organizations like ours is essential. But food support alone is not going to solve a complex problem like food insecurity, which is caused by and overlaps with other issues such as lack of affordable housing, social isolation, geographic location, racial and economic disparities, and chronic health issues.

We believe that solving hunger requires a holistic, community-wide approach, and that food has the power to bring people together. That's why we designed our new East County Center with space that community partners can use to host meetings and classes with resources for accessing affordable housing, healthcare, and other important services.

Manna also believes that *how* we provide food support matters. Organizations like ours must, first and foremost, respect the dignity of each person who seeks our support.

For Manna, this means:

- *Honoring dignity through respect.* It is important that every person who comes to Manna feels they are treated with respect and kindness. I was moved recently by this statement from one of our participants:

*“Manna never let me beg for food. They never asked me what happened, or why I needed food... Volunteers give me cold water to drink in the summer. There is soft music playing in the market. The volunteers at the front desk always greet me with respect – there is no yelling.”*

Whether they are helping people schedule appointments, packing food into cars, delivering food to someone’s doorstep, or guiding a shopper through the market, our frontline staff and volunteers all hear stories of great loss and hardship, and that takes an emotional toll. When the pandemic hit, these frontline workers were some of the most vulnerable to becoming infected. The incredible outpouring of support Manna received in response to the pandemic allowed us to invest in top-notch PPE, provide hazard pay, and offer flexibility for staff who needed time off.

Pandemic times and or not, Manna invests in wellness programs to support our staff’s physical and mental health. I know that many organizations don’t have the same resources we have to care for their staff as we try to do – but they should. If an organization can’t afford to invest in the care of staff and volunteers who serve on the front lines, those staff and volunteers won’t be able to care properly for the people they are supposed to be supporting.

I hope Congress will examine the issue of human resources support and work with the food assistance community on solutions. At Manna, we have a slogan, “We care for those who care for others.” I honestly believe this sets the tone and expectations for how our staff and volunteers treat everyone who comes to Manna for support.

- *Honoring dignity through food quality and choice.* Everyone deserves to eat food that we choose, food that is nutritious, fresh, delicious, and familiar to our family and community culture. Manna strives to provide as many nutritious and culturally-specific food options as we can to meet the needs of community members who come to us for support. We do this by actively listening to our participants to understand what foods they want, and we partner with local farmers, grocers, and community organizations to stock the widest possible variety of foods.

Just before the pandemic, Manna opened a food market where our participants can browse through grocery store-style shelves and our produce-filled cooler and select nutritious food items that meet their taste and cultural preferences. The pandemic forced us to close the market's doors for more than a year, but it is up and running again to the delight of our staff, volunteers, and the community members who love being able to shop for food that meets their needs and wants.

In a county as diverse as ours, it is not easy to supply culturally specific food that suits everyone who seeks Manna's support. To address this challenge, we recently partnered with the Ethiopian Community Center of Maryland to pilot a voucher program, which has been an enormous success. Community members receive core staple items from us and enjoy using the vouchers to shop for food that meets their cultural and dietary needs. The small local markets appreciate the business. We are already expanding the voucher program to other communities.

The pandemic reinforced the importance of offering choice in how people receive food support as well, which is why we are continuing home delivery and offering free ride-share services for our participants who are elderly, disable, or otherwise unable to reach us by public transportation.

- *Delivering nutrition education.* Manna's full-time nutritionist and dietetic interns offer free Community Food Education that makes crucial health information more accessible to the communities that we serve. Our programs include virtual and in-person youth cooking classes, family and adult cooking classes, wellness presentations, and 1:1 chats with our nutrition experts.

Manna also integrates nutrition education into the shopping experience by color coding and organizing products according to their food groups and having staff and volunteers serve as a resource for shoppers in our market.

- *Advocating for stronger public policies.* Manna staff help our participants apply for SNAP benefits, and our volunteer Advocacy Task Force works to keep food insecurity and its underlying causes in the minds of our government leaders and the media.
- *Commitment to justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion.* We know that economic and health disparities disproportionately affect people of color, people who live in certain zip codes. For Manna, focusing on those communities and building partnerships has been key to our long-term solutions to hunger. We host monthly "Breaking Bread" community discussions to explore how together we can correct racial and economic disparities, tackle the root causes of hunger, and create a more just and sustainable

food system in Montgomery County. And we are committed to ensuring that our diverse staff have the opportunities and support they need to fulfill their professional aspirations to serve others.

### **Building a Sustainable Local Food System**

As the pandemic caused the demand for food assistance to grow, it also exposed the vulnerability of the food system. Almost immediately, the pandemic interrupted food supply chains. Manna had already been buying produce from several local farmers but now, thanks to county and philanthropic funding, we are purchasing produce, meat, and eggs from 30 local farms at market price and awarding farmers small capacity-building grants through our Farm to Food Bank program.

Purchasing food from local farms means we can deliver the freshest, highest quality food to the people we support. Everyone deserves access to fresh fruits and vegetables, and high quality meat and eggs, yet that is not the reality for most people who are juggling bills and struggling to put food on the table. I believe that delivering locally-raised food is one of the best ways Manna can demonstrate the utmost regard for the people we support.

Investing in local farmers is also a crucial step toward a more just, secure, and sustainable local food system. Farmers get access to markets where they will receive fair prices, and for many of them, just a little help to expand storage and other infrastructure can mean the ability to produce even more food to benefit our local communities.

### **Conclusion**

I am proud of Manna and what we accomplish but we could do so much more, and support so many more people who struggle. Manna is fortunate to have the backing of our county government, local foundations, businesses, and individuals who can contribute generously to our organization. Many food assistance organizations across the country would like to provide the kind of support Manna does, but they don't have the same resources.

I hope that as Congress and the White House move forward to hold a White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, Hunger, and Health, you will devote attention to the key role food assistance organizations can play, and to the government investment needed so that we can all do our best work to break down barriers that create hunger, build community assets, support sustainable local food systems, and provide nutritious, culturally-relevant, tasty food in a manner that respects the dignity of every person in our nation.