

## Food and Basic Needs

In response to the increased need for food access during the COVID-19 Pandemic, Ramsey County allocated \$10 million of federal CARES funding for food and basic needs, which included funding for home-based meal delivery, food shelves and basic needs, and school meals for youth. In funding food shelves, districts and youth programs, Ramsey County's goal was to bolster already existing program areas, seeking partnerships with organizations that were already providing services to residents as well as contracting with new vendors to provide these services. CARES funds were distributed to contracted community partners between August and December 2020. Ramsey County contracted with 35 community partners in the following three contract areas:

### **Home-based meal delivery**

The home-based meal delivery (HDM) contracts established meal delivery for eligible Ramsey County residents through contracts with eight community partners. This was a new program area for the County that was not in existence prior to the start of COVID-19. [More information is available at the Ramsey County webpage.](#)

### **Food shelf and basic needs for food programs, food shelves, or food banks**

The food shelf and basic needs for food programs, food shelves, or food banks (Food shelf) contracts with community partners allowed for the purchasing of supplies, food, or staffing needed to expand food programs with 21 community partners. The purpose of this funding was to support already existing Food shelf programs.

### **Emergency food and meals for youth and students**

The emergency food and meals for youth and students contracts supported meals for youth. Ramsey County contracted with six school districts and youth programs to provide this service. In order to be eligible, organizations needed to be a School Food Authority (SFA) through the USDA with experience serving youth and students.

The goals of the CARES funding were to (1) make strategic investments to expand and enhance the free food supply and distribution network; (2) prioritize the communities, individuals, and families most at risk for COVID-19; and (3) prioritize communities, individuals, and families who lack access and transportation due to COVID-19. Service delivery in these areas ensured that individuals and families affected by COVID-19 had access to nutritious and culturally responsive groceries and basic needs supplies that could be picked up at designated areas or delivered to residents at home.

The Food Access evaluation will answer the following questions:

1. Did Ramsey County address the Community Needs Assessment priority areas?
2. Did the CARES funding that was distributed expand and enhance the free food supply and distribution network?
3. Are Ramsey County residents better off as a result of food access expansion?
4. Are Ramsey County residents getting connected to social services?

The evaluation team reviewed contract management documentation, surveys of residents who received home-delivered meals, county social service utilization, and vendor focus groups to answer the evaluation questions outlined above.

A link to the full report can be found on the [CARES Evaluation website](#). [Home-delivered meal data was reported monthly](#) at Open Data Ramsey County. [Food contracts with community organizations](#) are available here.

## What We Learned

### **Ramsey County addressed the Food and Basic Needs Assessment priority areas**

Prior to the CARES funding announcement, Ramsey County conducted a [Food and Basic Needs Assessment](#) to plan for the impact of COVID-19 on residents and identified ten priorities to guide the County's food access response.

Through the three CARES Food contract areas, the County met the identified priorities established in the Needs Assessment. Organizational partners included local businesses, non-profit organizations, and school districts. Ramsey County provided informational handouts on county services available to residents and maintained a website that provided information on food resources available for residents. Delivery programs for residents who were homebound were increased through the home-delivered meals, expanded food shelf delivery, and district and youth program delivery options. Usage was tracked across all three contract areas and regular communication was maintained between county staff and organizational partners. Home-delivered meal organizational partners also provided services to the county's homeless population. Increased capacity and access to public gardens was the only priority that was not met through the county's work, which may have been due to the growing season not coinciding with the contract period of August through December.

### **CARES funding expanded and enhanced the free food supply and distribution network**

Although the program did not have data on the number of people served by food shelves, food banks, and meal deliveries prior to the pandemic and this funding, there are several indications that the distribution was both enhanced and expanded by CARES funding. Focus groups conducted included a majority of vendors involved in the program in all three areas of food distribution. During focus groups, vendors who were already providing these services to the community reported the funding allowed them to expand the services they were currently providing to a greater number of people. The funding also created an opportunity for new organizations to enter the food supply and distribution work.

Food delivery was a new service offered by the county as a result of the additional funding. This allowed for individuals most vulnerable to COVID-19 to receive much needed food, meals and basic without the risk of going to pick things up in person. People with disabilities and seniors who regularly had family or home care assist with groceries or meals in their homes benefitted greatly as these in-person visits were not able to take place due to pandemic restrictions. In addition to expanding the reach of the services, vendors also reported the funding allowed them to enhance the products and services they could offer and deliver to residents. Vendors reported they had enhanced offerings of more culturally and ethnically specific foods as well as an increase in fresh produce available to residents.

### **Ramsey County residents are better off as a result of food access expansion**

Insight on whether residents are better off comes from monthly report data, satisfaction survey results and focus group discussions. According to monthly vendor reports, nearly 8,000 Ramsey County residents received home-delivered meals, over 22,000 deliveries were made to homes from local food shelf partners, and over 46,000 meals were delivered to students and youth by local school districts or youth programs.

Survey respondents were overall very satisfied with the experience of the home meal delivery service, rating it an average of 4.6 out of 5 stars. Respondents indicated the meals included a balanced mix of fruits or vegetables, grains, and protein, rating it an average of 4.4 out of 5 stars. Respondents reported that meals included foods they liked to eat and were comfortable eating, rating it an average of 4.2 out of 5 stars.

During focus group sessions, vendors shared examples of how residents are better off as a result of the program. One area highlighted was the home-delivered meals option available through this program. This addition was extremely beneficial to individuals who were homebound during the pandemic and unable to have in-home assistance from community or family members. There were several vendors who reported they were able to add a large number of people to the community they could serve with the increase of basic needs and food supply.

Another way in which residents are better off was explained as an increased understanding and connection with other organizations and neighborhoods. Vendors talked about learning about other local organizations and collaborating to better serve the community. They also mentioned they were able to work with and educate local providers about the needs and preferences of the surrounding community which influenced the foods and supplies stocked and available to residents in the area.

### **Ramsey County residents are connecting to social services**

Ramsey County increased their outreach to residents and community organizations regarding available food and other social service resources throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Ramsey County incorporated a number of methods to increase awareness of social services resources available to residents, including the food resources website, ongoing food community meetings, and CARES-funded food contracts with community organizations and local businesses. Contracted providers shared Ramsey County social service information and available resources with their program recipients throughout the course of CARES funding.

Reviewing SNAP and WIC program enrollment data, there was an increase in the number of residents enrolled in these programs in 2020 compared to 2019. In December 2020, there were over 60,000 residents enrolled in SNAP and almost 17,000 total residents enrolled in WIC. For both SNAP and WIC enrolled residents, this represented a seven percent change over the number of residents enrolled in December 2019.

## **Recommendations**

### **Short-term Recommendations**

- **Continue the home delivered meal program through the emergency response.** Home delivered meals have been a critical way for vulnerable populations to receive food, particularly for people who cannot leave their homes due to risks associated with COVID-19.
- **Explore a home delivered meal program model that would support entire families.** Future funding opportunities should consider how food, meals, and basic needs can be delivered to eligible households rather than individuals to better serve entire families.
- **Provide more information to potential vendors on proposal solicitation process.** Organization partners and county staff suggested facilitating information sessions on the proposal solicitation process. This could help organizations unfamiliar with the county's contracting process and requirements. Additional communications like videos could be posted on the Ramsey County website for vendors to access as needed.

### **Long-term Recommendations**

- **Provide more opportunities to connect people to ongoing food and basic needs resources, such as SNAP, WIC, and financial assistance resources.**
- **Facilitate ways to connect community organizations with each other.**
- **Continue to offer open-ended Requests for Informal Quotes and other Requests for Proposals.** Stating a goal or intended outcome with flexibility in how to meet that was a strength of this project. Vendors appreciated the open-ended nature of the Emergency Purchasing Informal Quotes (EPIQ) as it helped build their capacity and build on existing strengths. It also allowed organizations to tailor services to meet needs of particular communities.