

Freestore Foodbank (FSFB) is one of Ohio's largest food banks and provides emergency food and other services to roughly 511 community partners in over 20 counties in Ohio, Kentucky and Indiana. Since COVID-19, client numbers have increased significantly. Larger partner organizations of Freestore have seen two to three times the number of normal clients since COVID, resulting in a large increase in required resources and energy. In smaller partner organizations, there has been a smaller increase of at least 30%. As a whole, there has been an average of a 50% increase in food distribution compared to two years ago. On average, Ohio has seen an increase in food insecurity of 5.15%.^[1] This rate is slightly higher in the Tri-state area served by Freestore, at 5.22%.^[2] Within Hamilton County, there is a projected 8.7% increase in childhood food insecurity due to COVID-19 compared to rates in 2018, indicating the severity of this issue, especially among children.

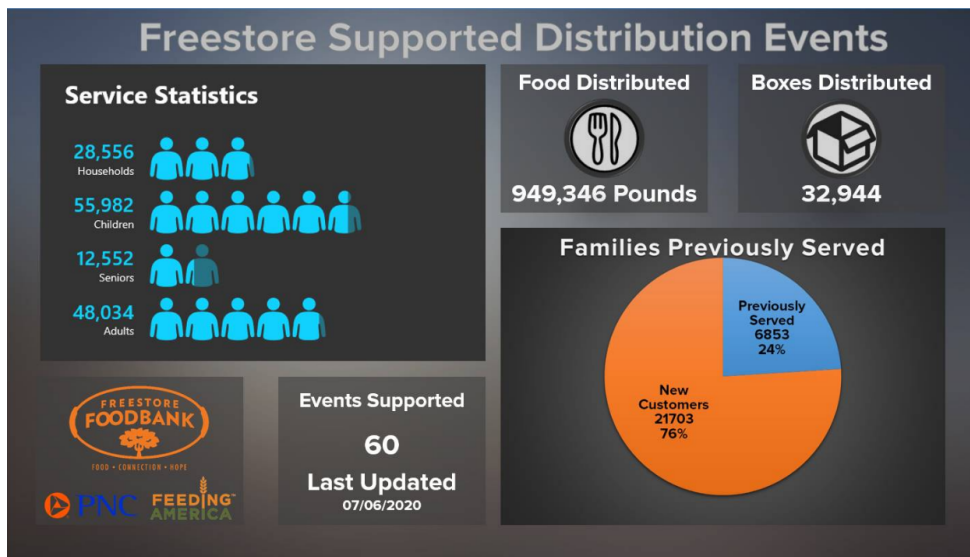
Freestore Foodbank relies heavily on the help of volunteers to sort, package and prep food for the foodbank. Due to COVID-19, Freestore Foodbank has seen volunteer rates drop dramatically and there is no to little volunteer support at this time. When there are volunteers, the counts are significantly down compared to before COVID-19. Volunteers are also required to wear adequate PPE to ensure the safety of all involved with Freestore, but this adds to operation costs.

To help keep volunteers, employees, and clients safe, Freestore Foodbank has also worked to implement social distancing protocols for individuals who want to access their food bank resources. In order to limit staff interaction with clients, they have adapted a "truck to trunk" model where the staff loads up the client's trunk with food supplies so that the client doesn't have to get out of their car. Freestore Foodbank has also limited the number of clients allowed in the pantry at one time, but they are still able to manage the amount of people coming in.

Due to increased demand, change in logistics, and need for additional staff, operation expenses have increased across the board. Exact increased cost estimates for Freestore Foodbank are not available at this time. It is probable that donations of large amounts of food from large organizations dropped during this time, and Freestore Foodbank then purchased food they previously received as donations in order to meet the needs of community partners and members of the community. For example, the Food Bank for the Heartland of Omaha saw an increase of food expenses to \$675,000 from \$75,000 a month.³

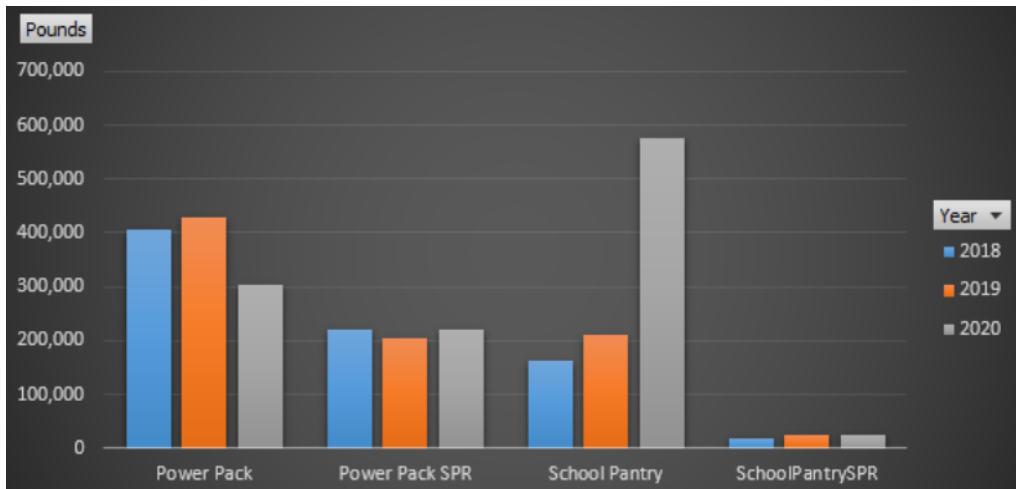
To obtain a broader perspective, the Ohio Nonprofit COVID-19 Survey Project assessed how non-profits have been impacted by COVID-19 and many of their concerns moving forward². Freestore is among over 78% of non-profits in the state of Ohio that is functioning below its pre-covid capacity². As such, it shares many concerns with these other non-profits including its loss in volunteers with an increase in expenses as discussed above which were common concerns expressed by other non-profits in the survey.

Of course, the pandemic did not affect FSFB’s operations alone; It also greatly impacted the communities it serves. In March, at the onset of the pandemic, there was a large spike in unemployment rate from less than 4% to a high of almost 15% by May, which has since steadily declined⁴. Skyrocketing unemployment rates and shortages at grocery stores saw more people relying on food pantries, often for the first time. During March-June, 76% of the customers at Freestore distribution events were “new”. After this time, these events were transitioned to be hosted by Freestore community partners, so that data is not accessible. These distribution events, 60 in total, distributed 949,346 pounds of food to 28,556 households which included 55,982 children, 12,552 seniors, and 48,034 adults.



For students facing food insecurity, their schools are often the ones providing their next meals. However, with many schools transitioning to remote learning, students who relied on school meals for food risked not knowing where their next meal was going to come from. To combat this problem prior to COVID, when students could risked not eating any meals during the weekend when they were out of school, Freestore put together and distributed Power Packs (packs of a dozen shelf-stable, kid friendly food sent home with students each Friday during the school year to ensure they have something to eat during the weekend). Unsurprisingly, because many students were not in school during the spring to receive the Power Packs, the amount of Power Packs distributed between March to August of this year is significantly decreased compared to the same time period last year (302,095 lbs of food this year vs. 428,471 lbs in 2019). However, the amount of food distributed to school food pantries has more than doubled (574,677 lbs vs 209,573 lbs in 2019), to match the increased need from student families.

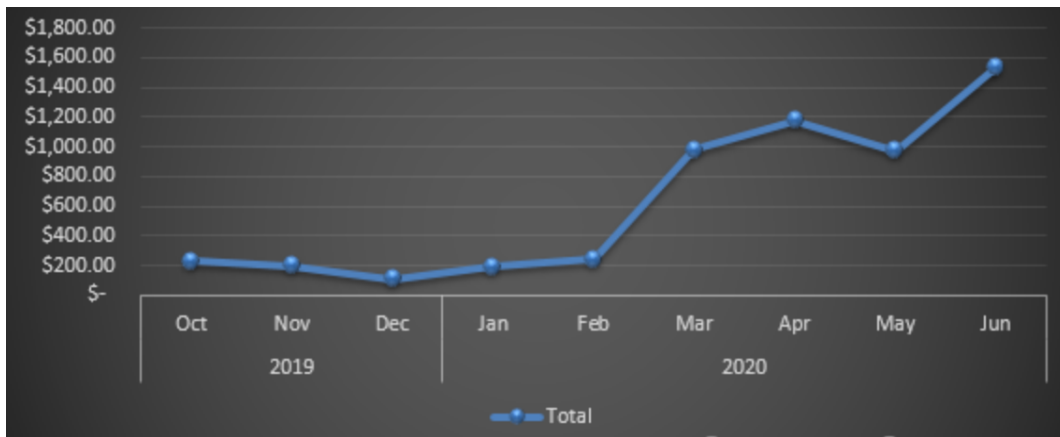
Power Packs and School Pantry Distribution (in lbs): 2018-2020



As FSFB often interfaces with individuals with the community, considerations had to be made regarding how they would continue to deliver their services safely. To prevent the spread of COVID while meeting community needs, FSFB has implemented safety measures in accordance with the guidelines and recommendations of the CDC. Masks are required for all individuals entering physical locations for any services and are provided to those upon request. Those who choose not to shop in the market or do not wish to enter the building for whatever reason, can pick up pre-packaged food bags (26 pounds) distributed from the front bay. In addition, Freestore's Liberty Street Market is open 9-3 pm for emergency food distribution of prepackaged bags with distancing practices in place for customers.

Another food service offered by Freestore that has remained open during the pandemic is the Healthy Harvest Mobile Market, a grocery store on wheels that provides fresh healthy affordable fresh produce and other food to greater Cincinnati communities. The mobile market gives people living in food deserts access to fresh produce and is unique in that it matches SNAP/EBT benefits dollar for dollar, but also accepts cash/credit/debit so anyone is welcome to shop. Last October, College Hill was added as a new stop and our service project from M1 year involved helping Freestore get the word out about this new location to the local community. From October 2019 to February 2020, the revenue generated at the College Hill location averaged around \$200 a month. From March to August, however, there was a significant increase in average monthly revenue to around \$1,000, suggesting an increase in the number of customers stopping by. This increase in usage is likely related to the much nicer weather that begins in March, but also also in part be associated with the onset of the pandemic and people using this mobile market as way to better utilize their SNAP/EBT benefits compared to a traditional grocer or out of necessity due to the shortage of pantry staples at many major stores.

**Revenue generated from Healthy Harvest Mobile Market College Hill location
(October 2019-June 2020)**



Freestore Foodbank, thanks to its large size and scope within Hamilton County and beyond, has been able to adjust its services to address the most pressing needs of the community spurred by the effects of COVID-19 infections, increased unemployment rates, and deviation from normalcy in day-to-day life. After the passage of the CARES Act, Hamilton County was awarded funding to assist families with up to \$2,500 within a three-month period for rent and utility payments.^[1] Freestore Foodbank was one of the three organizations chosen to help Hamilton County residents apply for this federal funding for rent and utility relief. Additionally, to help those who were or have been dropped into a low-income bracket, Freestore Foodbank's benefits enrollment department has provided enrollment assistant services to anyone needing SNAP benefits and/or health insurance through Medicaid.^[1] Due to the health risks brought about by COVID-19, Freestore Foodbank has also helped to assist with obtaining health and hygiene products, infant care products, household items, transportation assistance, and birth certificate and ID replacements. Finally, because COVID-19 has rarely only affected one aspect of life for many of Freestore Foodbank's clients, a stabilization program, where a case worker meets with individual clients to manage a full palette of basic needs, has been established.^[1] These case workers can provide housing resources, access to health and mental health services, resolution of legal issues, basic needs (food, clothing, and furniture), life skills to help with prioritizing and budgeting, benefits assistance, and referrals to other providers to address other more specific needs. It is uncommon for food insecurity to be the only area where Freestore Foodbank's clients are struggling at this time. With this understanding, Freestore Foodbank has expanded its reach to provide a central access point for receiving assistance in multiple areas.

In addition to the above, during the Covid-19 pandemic, Freestore Foodbank has reported lower usage of the "Produce Perks" food prescription program which they created. The program is designed for doctors to give "prescriptions" to their patients that can be redeemed at Freestore locations for healthy foods. Based on statistics regarding Healthy Harvest Sales and Revenue this year, between March and April, there was a steep drop off in revenue from around \$1,300 to \$300. This drop in revenue could be attributed to several factors, including fewer people leaving their homes to redeem their "produce perks", as well as individuals going to

fewer doctor's appointments due to the restrictions put in place at the onset of the pandemic. The relative youth of the program (started in June 2019) makes comparison difficult, given lack of available data points. However, given that generally the Healthy Harvest Mobile Market in general sees an increase in usage in the warmer months of the year, this trend seems to indicate decreased utilization directly from the pandemic. Given that the usage has not recovered to levels prior to the pandemic, even though we are seeing greater food insecurity⁵, it seems likely that there has been a drop off in advocating or advertisement of these resources.

That being said, Freestore Foodbank provides all the resources and information about their programs and how to access them online at no additional cost to healthcare providers or patients themselves. In addition, Freestore has partnered with several clinics in the area and Amazon to offer delivery of food who have been identified as having unmet food needs. Clinics enrolled in this program can identify patients in need and then enroll them in this program, which is fully compliant with HIPAA and protects the patient's anonymity and medical information, while providing them with access to healthy food options. Health care providers who work in clinics with this program can continue to promote this program and those who do not yet have access to this resource could advocate on behalf of their patients to add their clinic to the program.

With regards to medical students and physicians advocating for funds to address food insecurity in Cincinnati, there are many avenues which can be pursued. Simply calling or contacting local government officials to discuss food insecurity in light of COVID could go a long way in keeping this topic at the forefront of our policymakers' minds. Attendance at city council meetings have been moved online and thus anyone with an internet connection could voice their opinion to shed light on this topic and continue to advocate for patients in need. Finally, the number of people volunteering at Freestore Foodbank has sharply decreased and, as such, volunteering extra time could be an easy first step for those wanting to care for their community members in need.

Sources:

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2. Beaton E. Ohio Nonprofit COVID-19 Survey: A Report of the Results. <https://poseidon01.ssrn.com/delivery.php?ID=778127031007073085002087126031094026052002093065027039103118110064007065092108074068110106060011059022008025094067105091111093122019094003010001031120119086117097101095030063100110002017081126115126085127006111099081098125114107088110101108022021015120>. Published August 3, 2020. Accessed September 4, 2020.
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