




EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

From Food Insecurity to Food Equity,
A Roadmap to End Hunger in Illinois



BRINGING EQUITY TO FOOD ACCESS: THE MISSION OF THE ILLINOIS COMMISSION TO END HUNGER

The Illinois Commission to End Hunger is a public-private partnership composed of stakeholders from across the state dedicated to the belief that no one in Illinois should ever face hunger. The Commission was established by the Commission to End Hunger Act of 2010 with the purpose of developing an action plan to ensure cross-collaboration among government entities and community partners toward the shared goal of ending hunger in Illinois.

Hunger was prevalent in Illinois before COVID-19, but the pandemic has made hunger and the fragility of many working families more visible. Illinois residents face significant hurdles amid the coronavirus pandemic and resulting economic crisis. Hunger does not have to be one of those hurdles.

In the short term, Illinois can make meaningful progress against hunger by better connecting people to food programs and promoting equitable access to food. This report maps out a three-part strategy for leveraging technology, harnessing innovation, and strengthening collaboration. Through specific, actionable recommendations, we provide a roadmap for reducing hunger in Illinois.

In the long run, ending hunger requires that we address the root causes of poverty and racial inequity. Communities of color and rural communities often lack equitable access to quality education, jobs, housing, and health services. Any solution to food insecurity must also include strategies that support equitable economic outcomes.

THE FACE OF HUNGER IN ILLINOIS

No corner of the state has been left untouched by the food security impacts of COVID-19. But while hunger exists in every corner of the state, it does not affect all communities equally. Disaggregated food insecurity data by race and ethnicity show that Black and Hispanic households have one and a half to two times the rate of food insecurity than that of White and other non-Hispanic households.ⁱ As a result, developmental

and health outcomes, as well as other consequences of food insecurity, are disproportionately borne by people of color.

Even before COVID, 12.7 percent of Illinois children and 8.6 percent of Illinois seniors were food insecure were food insecure.ⁱⁱ Having a disability increases the likelihood of food insecurity due to both increased household expenses as well as reduced earnings. People experiencing homelessness and the housing insecure are at higher risk of hunger as they face trade-offs between housing and food.

CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF HUNGER

For many families, hunger is caused by poverty that results from a lack of jobs or because jobs pay too little. For other families, jobs may be available but unattainable. For example, a parent may not be able to take a job or work enough hours because they lack affordable childcare options. The end result of inadequate employment and wages is poverty and a lack of resources.

But hunger is not limited to families living in poverty. People earning above the official poverty line often still struggle to choose between food and other basic needs. In fact, 30 percent of those experiencing hunger in Illinois earn too much income to qualify for nutrition assistance programs but still struggle to put food on the table.^{iv}

Food insecurity is also a consequence of systemic racial inequities in our country. People of color have disproportionately limited access to good paying jobs, affordable, quality health care, and quality education, further contributing to the conditions that foster poverty and all its consequences, including food insecurity.^v

The consequences of hunger are far reaching. Hunger is inextricably linked with health and mental health, as well as educational outcomes. There is a strong connection between hunger and chronic diseases like high blood pressure, heart

disease, and diabetes.^{vii} Hunger is associated with a host of negative impacts on child well-being, making it hard for children to concentrate in school, decreasing their ability to perform well in school, as well as increased tardiness and absenteeism.^{viii ix xi xii}

^{xiii} Because food insecurity is disproportionately experienced by people of color, communities of color disproportionately bear these consequences.

SOLUTION TO HUNGER: BETTER CONNECTING PEOPLE TO THE NUTRITION THEY NEED

We envision an Illinois where people in every rural and urban community have access to the nutrition they need. The first and most important step is to ensure that nutrition assistance programs are accessible and fully leveraged, and to make sure that people have access to affordable, quality food in their communities.

The fastest and most direct way to alleviate hunger is through the emergency food system and federal nutrition assistance programs. Through food banks, pantries, shelters, and kitchens, the emergency food system provides groceries and meals to people in need. Federal nutrition programs like SNAP and WIC provide groceries to low-income people, and programs targeting children and seniors provide nutritious meals and snacks in a variety of settings.

Unfortunately, many people who need food assistance do not utilize available programs. Some may not be aware that they are eligible or know how to sign up; others face barriers to enrollment, or a program does not operate in their community. Key barriers include:

- **Making sure people are aware of nutrition programs:** People can't use programs they don't know about. By making sure that people who are food insecure are aware of what nutrition programs exist, who is eligible, and how to enroll, we can better leverage these resources to end hunger.
- **Helping people navigate nutrition programs:** Application assistance is especially important for people with limited mobility to access public aid offices, college students and able-bodied adults who have additional eligibility requirements, and immigrants who face language barriers or citizenship requirements.
- **Improving access to food retail and nutrition programs:** In both rural and urban settings, some people simply are not close to where food can be accessed, whether that is a grocery store, food pantry, summer meal site for children, or meal program for older adults.

- **Providing not just food, but healthful food:** Feeding people facing hunger is about more than simply providing food. It is important to connect people with the most nutritious food possible to support their health and well-being.

COMMISSION RECOMMENDATIONS

The Illinois Commission to End Hunger has a vision for ending hunger in Illinois that focuses on better connecting people to nutrition programs, improving access to food, and promoting nutrition. To get there, we are advancing three key strategies.

Leveraging technology to connect people with benefits: Technology has the power to transform the way we interact with the world, and that power should be leveraged to better connect people to nutrition assistance programs. Some of the tools that are taken for granted in the private sector are not fully utilized when it comes to nutrition assistance. These tools can be used to make it easy for people to apply for and maintain enrollment in nutrition programs.

- **Create a simplified mobile-friendly application for SNAP** to make it easier for people to apply for and maintain benefits
- **Create an online scheduling system for WIC** to make it easier for people to schedule an appointment
- **Create a statewide online application for free and reduced-price school meals** to make it easier for families to enroll in breakfast and lunch
- **Launch an afterschool meals texting program** so families can locate nearby program sites
- **Leverage e-mail and texting platforms** to facilitate communication with nutrition program clients about applications, appointments, and renewals

Harnessing innovation to help programs reach more people: To make sure we are meeting the needs of people facing hunger, we should constantly strive to find new and better ways of connecting people with food and nutrition programs. One important area for innovation is around improving food access. Too many rural and urban communities struggle to access food, whether because residents must travel a long time to reach a grocery store or food pantry, or because they lack a child or older adult meal program nearby. Another opportunity for innovation is around the implementation of federal nutrition programs. Through state options, waivers, and pilots, government agencies can lead the way in our efforts to innovate around program delivery.

- **Co-locate food access points with transportation hubs, health centers, and public benefits offices**, for example locating a farmers' market at a bus interchange or senior center, or operating a food pantry at a WIC clinic
- **Increase the number of meal program sites**, for example by encouraging schools operating a lunch program to operate a breakfast program or encouraging summer meal program sponsors to operate afterschool snack or supper programs year-round
- **Leverage innovative delivery models for groceries and meals**, such as online shopping, home delivery, and mobile markets
- **Support nontraditional food retail**, for example farmers' markets, urban agriculture, and community gardens
- **Secure a waiver to allow community-based organizations assisting with SNAP applications to collect applicant signatures over the phone** so people could get benefits more quickly
- **Support increased breakfast participation**, for example by setting participation goals and providing start-up funding and technical assistance to help schools implement innovative breakfast models
- **Improve program promotion across programs**, for example promoting WIC at Head Start centers, so that people enrolled in one program are made aware of other programs for which they may be eligible
- **Improve data matching across programs** so that people enrolled in one program are more quickly connected with other programs for which they are eligible and may wish to enroll in
- **Create a one-stop, no wrong door entry point**, for example a state 211 line or inter-agency website with comprehensive program eligibility and enrollment information
- **Improve coordination among community-based organizations** to improve equitable access to nutrition assistance

A NEW DIRECTION

We have the programs in place to alleviate hunger. By expanding awareness of programs, eliminating barriers to participation, and expanding access to nutritious foods we can ensure that more food insecure people are connected to the nutritious food that they need. But while strengthening nutrition programs and improving access will alleviate hunger in the near-term, we must also address the root causes of poverty and racial inequity and create economic opportunity for all communities if we are to eliminate hunger in Illinois.

We won't successfully achieve our goals without an inclusive process that includes people facing food insecurity. We must center these voices throughout our work, from planning to implementation to evaluation.

The responsibility to end hunger in Illinois is a shared one. This roadmap highlights the way, but each of us has responsibility to help take Illinois where we need to go. The Illinois Commission to End Hunger is committed to working with stakeholders across the state to identify and implement the change needed to reduce hunger in Illinois. Together we can ensure that Illinois is a place where each of us has the food we need to thrive.

For more information, please visit www.endhungerillinois.org.

Working collaboratively across state agencies and community-based organizations to promote program awareness:

Ending hunger requires the efforts of multiple stakeholders. A mix of tactics is necessary to better connect existing and potential nutrition program participants with nutrition. State agencies and community-based organizations can better coordinate efforts to raise awareness of nutrition programs and emergency food programs. State agencies can cross-promote programs among current participants to identify people enrolled in one program who are eligible for but not enrolled in another program.

- **Coordinate on a public-private marketing campaign** to educate consumers about nutrition programs, utilizing culturally competent communications

¹ U.S. Department of Agriculture <https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/94849/err-270.pdf?v=9313.6> Tables 2 & 3.

² Map the Meal Gap 2018, Feeding America <https://www.feedingamerica.org/sites/default/files/2020-06/Map%20the%20Meal%20Gap%202020%20Child%20Food%20Insecurity%20Module.pdf>

³ The State of Senior Hunger, Feeding America, Table 3. <https://www.feedingamerica.org/sites/default/files/2020-05/2020-The%20State%20of%20Senior%20Hunger%20in%202018.pdf>

⁴ Map the Meal Gap 2020, Feeding America. <https://www.feedingamerica.org/sites/default/files/2020-06/Map%20the%20Meal%20Gap%202020%20Combined%20Modules.pdf>

⁵ Bread for the World Institute: Applying Racial Equity to U.S. Federal Nutrition Assistance Programs <http://files.bread.org/institute/report/racial-equity/special-report-applying-racial-equity-august-2019.pdf>

⁶ Bread for the World Institute: Applying Racial Equity to U.S. Federal Nutrition Assistance Programs- <http://files.bread.org/institute/report/racial-equity/special-report-applying-racial-equity-august-2019.pdf>

⁷ Seligman HK, Bindman AB, Vittinghoff E, Kanaya AM, Kushel MB. Food insecurity is associated with diabetes mellitus: results from the National Health Examination and Nutritional Examination Survey (NHANES) 1999–2002. *J Gen Intern Med.* 2007;22(7):1018–23.

⁸ Seligman HK, Laraja BA, Kushel MB. Food insecurity is associated with chronic disease among low-income NHANES participants. *J Nutr.* 2010; 140(2):304–10.

⁹ Cook JT, Frank DA. Food Security, Poverty, and Human Development in the United States. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences.* 2008 (Online Early Articles). doi:10.1196/annals.1425.001, <http://www.blackwell-synergy.com/doi/full/10.1196/annals.1425.001?cookieSet=1>.

¹⁰ Jyoti D.F., Frongillo E.A., Jones S.J. Food Insecurity Affects School Children's Academic Performance, Weight Gain, and Social Skills. *J Nutr.* 2005 Dec; 135: 2831–2839.

¹¹ Alaimo K, Olson C.M., Frongillo E.A. Food Insufficiency and American School-Aged Children's Cognitive, Academic, and Psychosocial Development. *Pediatrics.* 2001 July; 109(1): 44–53.

¹² Kleinman R.E., Murphy M.J., Little M., Pagano M., Wheeler C.A., Regal K., Jellinek M.S. Hunger in Children in the United States: Potential Behavioral and Emotional Correlates. *Pediatrics.* 1998 Jan; 101(1): e3

¹³ Kleinman R.E., Murphy J.M., Little M., Pagano M., Wheeler C.A., Regal K and Jellinek M.S. "Hunger in Children in the United States: Potential Behavioral and Emotional Correlates," *Pediatrics*, Vol. 101, No. 1, 1998.

¹⁴ Nutrition and Student Performance at School, *Journal of School Health.* Volume 75 Issue 6, July 2005