

The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on U.S. Hunger Relief Organizations

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Disclaimers

About Duke World Food Policy Center

The [World Food Policy Center](#) is a research, education, and convening organization within Duke University's Sanford School of Public Policy. Its mission is to advance connected and inclusive food system policy and practice in support of equity and resilience of local and global food systems. WFPC work centers on economic development through food justice; root causes and narratives of racial inequity in the food system; the role of institutions in supporting community-led food justice; decision-making, power and benefit in food system governance; local food system analysis; and public health and nutrition. The conclusions and recommendations of any World Food Policy publication are solely those of its author(s), and do not reflect the views of the Duke University or its other scholars.

About WhyHunger

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Acronyms

BIPOC	Black, Indigenous and People of Color
CDP	Center for Disaster Philanthropy
CSA	Community Supported Agriculture
CTHG	Closing the Hunger Gap
HRO	Hunger Relief Organization
MOWAA	Meals on Wheels Association of America
NANASP	National Association of Nutrition and Aging Services Programs
P-EBT	Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer
PPE	Personal protective equipment
SNAP	Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program
TEFAP	The Emergency Food Assistance Program
USDA	United States Department of Agriculture
USDA-ERS	United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service
USDA-AMS	United States Department of Agriculture: Agricultural Marketing Service
WIC	Women, Infants & Children food assistance program

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Executive Summary

This study is a detailed and nuanced story about COVID-19's impact on food insecurity in the U.S. through the experiences of private, charitable non-profit organizations. These Hunger Relief Organizations (HROs), such as Food Banks, food pantries, and anti-hunger Advocacy Organizations, were on the front lines of food assistance, ensuring people who were in need got access to food during the most worrisome months of the pandemic. This research sampled the experiences and activities of these HROs across the U.S. from June through September 2020.

Goals of the research inquiry

1. To document the actions, needs, barriers, and successes of Hunger Relief Organizations (HROs) providing access to food during a pandemic.
2. To assess potential long-term shifts in HRO policies, practices, programs, and purpose as a result of providing food access during a pandemic.
3. To identify recommendations for systemic change in the emergency food system highlighted by this crisis and in local/state/federal policy to support those changes long-term.

Overview of survey respondents

- Hunger Relief Organizations self-selected into three categories, which we labeled and defined as follows:
 - Frontline Organizations:** Community-based organizations providing food directly to people in need (i.e. food pantries, soup kitchens and food shelves)
 - Advocacy Organizations:** Anti-hunger organizations that do not provide direct services but whose mission includes ending or lessening food insecurity
 - Food Banks:** Organizations with storage facilities and trucks that procure and distribute food to Frontline Organizations and/or provide direct food access to people in need from their own location.
- Most HRO respondents serve one or more counties, but Advocacy Organizations report a nationwide service focus.
- The majority of HRO respondents have been in operation for more than 20 years.
- There are marked differences in the operational budgets for HRO respondents - with Food Banks as the financially largest operations.

Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on HRO clients

- During the survey period, 79% of HROs saw an increase in demand for their existing services.
- More than 85% of Food Banks and Frontline Organizations reported serving clients needing access to food assistance for the first time.
- 77% of Frontline Organizations and 85% of Food Banks indicated that they served a larger number of unemployed clients.

HROs adapted operations to meet client needs

- 98% of HROs responding to the survey stayed open, but had to make shifts in operations to adapt, such as safety precautions, pausing in-person programming, and creating new programs to meet the increased demand.
- 63% of Frontline Organizations started curbside pickup, and 55% started delivery or drop off.
- Between 25-35% of HROs reported that volunteers and staff contracted the COVID-19 virus.
- The majority of HROs don't plan to continue pandemic-necessitated operational shifts, especially those that reduce client choice.

Keys to success for HROs

- 83% of HROs cited pre-established relationships with funders, 75% of HROs selected increased local and regional coordination, and 72% of HROs identified short-term increases in philanthropic funding as keys to success.
- Majority of HROs experienced an increase in funding from different sources, the top 2 being philanthropic and individual donations. Over 80% of Food Banks experienced increase in philanthropic and individual funding, over 60% of Food Banks had increased state, federal, and corporate funding.
- Among the different types of HROs, Food Banks reported receiving increased funding at higher levels than other types of HROs. Many HROs commented on concerns for sustainability and equity in future funding mechanisms.
- More than 70% of HROs cited communication and operational coordination between HROs and their funders, farmers and growers, and other stakeholders as a key to success.

Biggest challenges for HROs

- Overall the biggest challenge for HROs was loss of volunteer base due to COVID risk. Over 80% of Food Banks and over 60% of other HROs lost volunteers initially. At the same time, 75% of Food Banks were able to hire more staff to compensate for this sudden reduction in workforce.
- Around 60% of HROs rated a lack of refrigeration space for perishable food and space for shelf-stable food as critical limitations and barriers. In addition, over 60% of Food Banks and Frontline Organizations reported concerns about lack of transportation for clients to receive food.
- HROs struggled with the lack of coordination, consistency, and predictability of the government's response to the pandemic.

HROs identified weaknesses in the emergency food system, and overall food system

- 79% of HROs identified dependence on volunteer staff and donations and “just in time” food supply (69%) as weaknesses.
- 65% of HROs cite lack of government support and solutions to address the root causes of hunger as problematic.
- More than 75% of HROs see inequitable access to healthy, fresh food as a food system weakness and more than 59% see an overabundance of processed foods as a problem.
- More than 62% of HROs see the cost of food as a significant problem, as well as the precarity of food supply chains (more than 66%).
- Insufficient government support for small-scale farmers was identified as a weakness of the food system by 77% of the Food Banks and 53% of Frontline Organizations and Advocacy Organizations.
- 72% of HROs identified unpredictable food supply chains and increased reliance on shelf stable items as opposed to fresh foods (46%) as weaknesses in responding to emergencies.

HROs suggest changes to strengthen emergency food system effectiveness

- HROs call for increased, sustainable, and more flexible funding.
- HROs see a need for logistical, structural and technological support.
- HROs need support for their programmatic needs such as media, outreach, and volunteer support.

HROs call for stronger social safety net as key to addressing food insecurity

- HROs advocate for local, statewide or federal officials to increase funding for Pandemic-EBT, The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), unemployment, and universal free school meals.
- HROs advocate for increased support for programs that intersect with issues of food security such as affordable housing, mental health, childcare and virtual school programs.
- HROs advocate for Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) changes such as more flexibility, broader access, fewer eligibility requirements, and a simpler application.

HROs recognize the need for more focus on local food systems and small-scale agriculture

- HROs call for nation-wide policy changes to support small-scale agriculture and local food systems as an emerging solution to the precarity of existing food supply chains.
- HROs plan to make programmatic changes to support local and small-scale food systems.

HROs recognize structural racism and intend to address racial inequities in various ways

- 75% of Food Banks, 69% of Advocacy Organizations, and 53% of Frontline Organizations recognize structural racism as a weakness of the food system.
- HROs intend to address racial inequities by providing equitable food access to their clients, making internal policy and programmatic changes through a racial equity lens, and advocating for broader policy changes to rectify racial inequities in society.

HROs call for more root-cause work to end hunger

- Around 65% of HROs cite lack of government support and solutions to address the root causes of hunger as problematic.
- More than 60% of HROs identify low wage jobs in the food sector, and lack of valuing essential food system workers as significant problems.
- 7 to 19% of HROs plan to spend more time on fair wage advocacy campaigns compared to their pre-pandemic allocated time.
- HROs call for better working conditions and benefits for all workers along the food chain
- 60 to 90% of HROs plan to continue or increase their advocacy efforts after the pandemic.

HRO metrics of success

- Frontline Organizations primarily measure impact through the number of people receiving food services (83%), the pounds of food provided (66%), and the number of meals provided (46%).
- Food Banks also primarily measure impact through the pounds of food provided (88%), the number of people receiving food services (73%), and the number of meals provided (69%).
- Advocacy Organizations (55%) primarily focus on changes in the government policies and practices as a measure of impact.
- Less than 5% of all HROs responded that they measure success by the number of people no longer needing their services.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For HROs

- Include client enrollment in social safety-net programs as an operational priority.
- Engage clients in defining and implementing advocacy agendas.
- Launch or join advocacy campaigns for affordable housing, living wages, and accessible healthcare – in addition to the standard advocacy efforts by many HROs to preserve and/or enhance Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP), The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infant and Children (WIC), and the National School Lunch Program (NSLP).
- Start, continue or expand programs that address food insecurity at its root causes.
- Reevaluate measures of success for food insecurity work to focus on progress towards community stability and resilience - not poundage of food distributed and meals served.

For Philanthropy

- Seek to fund projects that address problems and challenges holistically at their social, political and economic intersections.
- Invest in the learning and networking needs of HROs. Support the building of processes and infrastructure that create opportunities for peer-to-peer learning.
- Continue to build and reinforce relationships with HROs, particularly Black, Indigenous, and People of color (BIPOC)-led and BIPOC-accountable organizations.
- Adapt foundation policies and practices in order to increase investment directly in Frontline Organizations that are embedded in their communities.
- Help communities bridge the gap between chronic food assistance needs and community food systems that are both sustainable and resilient.
- Reevaluate measures of success for food insecurity work to focus on progress towards community economic stability and resilience - not pounds of food distributed and meals served.

For USDA

- Continue to deepen the SNAP social safety net, and make P-EBT permanent.
- Learn from state feedback and make SNAP waivers permanent to lift more families out of poverty.
- Take steps to identify and understand the different characteristics and needs of communities in crisis vs. communities facing chronic, systemic problems--and adjust social safe net responses accordingly.
- Deepen the transparency of the USDA's emergency plan and communications protocols so that supporting actors in emergency response can operate with less uncertainty and more efficiency.

- Operationalize client choice of food, especially culturally appropriate food, as a core value in emergency food provision.
- Address the overabundance of processed foods in the food system through food policy changes that prioritize societal health over industry profit, and hold industry responsible for the adverse societal impact of unhealthy foods.
- Preserve small family farms and tribal communities that are producing nutritious food in concert with the local ecology and maintain direct sales to consumers, local restaurants, schools and grocery outlets.
- Adopt a set of values, policies and priorities that amplify investment in local and regional food and farm economies and in the health of our natural resources while recognizing that those preparing the soil, harvesting fruits, and stocking the grocery store shelves are “life-sustaining workers” that deserve good pay and just working conditions.
- Support community scale agroecological production and distribution while centering BIPOC as those most impacted across all sectors of the food system.

The U.S. is witnessing an emergency food system pushed to its limits, exposing the true extent of the root causes of food insecurity. The experiences and sentiments captured in this mid-year 2020 study highlight and amplify existing issues around food insecurity in the U.S. At the time of writing this report, the COVID-19 pandemic continues, but national, state and local responses have evolved. Effective vaccines and widespread vaccine distribution are lessening workplace restrictions, increasing people’s ability to commute and travel, and making it easier for individuals to share communal space. However, the world has not yet reached a post-pandemic state, or a “new normal.”

The pandemic arguably creates a crossroads moment for addressing food security in the U.S. The results of this survey, when placed alongside what we all witnessed and experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, spotlight fault lines in the emergency food system and clear opportunities for guaranteeing the health and well-being of people residing in the U.S.

Introduction

During 2020, the COVID-19 virus became a global pandemic causing an unprecedented crisis for the hunger relief sector in the United States. Prior to the onset of COVID-19, [over 35 million people in the U.S.](#) regularly struggled to put adequate food on the table for their families, and [4 out of 5 U.S. workers lived paycheck to paycheck](#) (USDA ERS 2022; PYMNTS and LendingClub 2021). In the midst of the pandemic, the number of people experiencing food insecurity was estimated to be [over 60 million](#), and unemployment tripled from 3.6% to 13.0% of the population (Feeding America 2020a; Smith et al. 2021). However, by the end of 2020, according to the [USDA-ERS Household Food Security Report 2020](#) released in September 2021, the rate of food insecurity had returned to 10.5% of U.S. households (38.3 million people living in food insecurity, including 6.1 million children and 9.4 million adults living in households with very low food security¹) (Coleman-Jensen et al. 2021). 2019 – pre-pandemic – marked the first time that the rate of food insecurity (10%) fell significantly below the previous low point recorded in 2007, prior to the Great Recession (USDA ERS 2021c). A national food insecurity rate that has not dipped below 10% even in more prosperous times is a reminder that hunger is consistently a pressing paradoxical social challenge in one of the wealthiest countries in the world.

And the fact that it swelled to more than double that at the height of the pandemic demonstrates the precarity many U.S. households face in making ends meet (Silva 2020). Further, a close examination of the 2020 household food insecurity report, supplemented by the U.S. Census Bureau’s real time data collection throughout 2020 (US Census Bureau 2021b), revealed that Black, Indigenous and Latinx households’ experience of food insecurity remained the same or became worse when disaggregated and compared to white households. Hispanic households experienced roughly double the rates of food insecurity compared to white households — something that was also true before the pandemic. The

¹ Very low food security is defined by the USDA as: normal eating patterns of one or more household members were disrupted and food intake was reduced at times during the year because they had insufficient money or other resources for food (USDA ERS 2021c).

experience of Black households when compared to white households demonstrates a widening gap as a result of the pandemic. Black households now experience roughly triple the rate of food insecurity compared to white households – this was not true before the pandemic (Feeding America).

Many news stories and reports from Indigenous or tribal organizations revealed the depth of food insecurity experienced by Native peoples in the U.S. during the pandemic (Hassanein 2021; EurekaAlert! 2021; Germain 2021). However, federal data collection efforts that inform the response to food insecurity, do not delineate Native American populations, rather collectively categorizing all Asians, Alaskan Native, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders (Romero-Briones, Biscarra Dilley, and Renick 2021). “Information collected from non-governmental sources generally places the rate of Native American food insecurity (1 in 4) above the national average and double that of white households (1 in 8) (Swinburne 2020) gathering, and cultivating culturally relevant and locally available foods². A 2019 study co-designed and conducted by UC Berkeley and four Native American tribes living within the Klamath River region (spanning parts of California and Oregon) showed that 92% of Native American households in the study suffered from food insecurity.

The main hunger alleviation program in the U.S. is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as Food Stamps. In 2019, prior to the pandemic, [SNAP served an average of 35.7 million people per month](#), or 10.9% of the U.S. population (USDA ERS 2021b). At the same time, the food insecurity rate ([reports of reduced quality, variety, or desirability of diet and/or reports of multiple indications of disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake](#)) was estimated to be 10.5% of U.S. households (USDA ERS 2021a). Research from the Urban Institute

² A study published in the Journal of Hunger & Environmental Nutrition parsed through the data collected by the Food Security Supplement from 2000 to 2010 to identify the rate of food insecurity among American Indians and Alaskan Natives. The study found that over this ten-year period these communities averaged a food insecurity rate of 25% (Jernigan et al. 2017). A recent study, prior to COVID-19, of Native American tribes in the Klamath Basin in northern California/southern Oregon, revealed that 92% of the households suffered from food insecurity (Sowerwine et al. 2019).

Figure 1. The Emergency Food System encompasses privately supported food distribution, supplemented by federally purchased commodities, and FEMA’s Food and Shelter Program.

Emergency Food System		Social Safety Net	
<p>Hunger Relief Organizations (Food Banks, Food Pantries, Soup Kitchens)</p> <p>Characteristics</p> <p>Funding: Privately funded through charitable contributions from individuals, businesses and philanthropy</p> <p>Purpose: provide food on a temporary and supplemental basis at no cost to families/individuals experiencing food insecurity</p> <p>Employees: heavy reliance on non-compensated volunteers, some paid staff</p> <p>Relies on: cash donations, industry donation of food and food at risk of being wasted</p> <p>Administered by: non-profit, community-based and/or faith-based organizations with both staff and volunteers</p>	<p>The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP)</p> <p>Characteristics</p> <p>Funding: Federal assistance takes the form of federally purchased commodities and funding for administration costs</p> <p>Purpose: federal food distribution program that supports food banks, food pantries, soup kitchens, and other emergency feeding organizations serving low-income people residing in the U.S.</p> <p>Employees: federally paid staff</p> <p>Relies on: funding authorized through the Farm Bill</p> <p>Administered by: Federally funded staff and contractors</p>	<p>Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)</p> <p>Characteristics</p> <p>Funding: FEMA funding can be allocated to the Emergency Food and Shelter Program</p> <p>Purpose: to coordinate the response to a disaster that has occurred in the United States and that overwhelms the resources of local and state authorities.</p> <p>Employees: federally paid staff</p> <p>Relies on: funding authorized the U.S. Department of Homeland Security</p> <p>Administered by: Federally funded staff and contractors</p>	<p>Federal and State Anti-Poverty Programs</p> <p>Characteristics</p> <p>Funding: Funded by the federal and state governments.</p> <p>Purpose: Intended to uplift low-income families through these programs addressing food, housing, education, and income. Thirteen programs make up the federal antipoverty (welfare) safety net: Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP); Child Nutrition Program (School meals); Women, Infants and Children (WIC) food program; Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF); Refundable Tax Credits; Housing Assistance (HUD); Supplemental Security Income (SSI); Pell Grants; Head Start preschool program; Job Training programs; Child Care and after school programs; Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP); Lifeline (Obama phone); Various state-level programs. <u>SNAP, WIC, and Child Nutrition programs are specifically focused on food access.</u></p> <p>Employees: paid federal and state staff</p> <p>Relies on: Federal and state funding authorizations</p> <p>Administered by: federal and state employees</p>

Source: authors

in 2020 estimated that even the [maximum possible benefit of SNAP dollars is not adequate for meal-costs in 96% of U.S. counties](#) (Urban Institute 2021). The need that arises from this gap is fulfilled by what is called an **emergency food system**.

Although there is no singular definition, the emergency food system is widely considered by researchers and the USDA to consist of private, charitable **Hunger Relief Organizations (HROs)**, such as those that are represented in this study: Food Banks, Frontline Organizations (soup kitchens and food pantries or food shelves) and Advocacy Organizations. These organizations are in turn supported by private foundations, businesses and corporations, and individuals donating food, money, or time. Food Banks that receive direct contributions from corporations and federal suppliers act as warehouses and then distribute food to Frontline Organizations such as food pantries and soup kitchens (Feeding America).

Two large institutions provide access to most of the food circulating through the emergency food system. The USDA purchases surplus agricultural commodities and allocates a portion to each state based on a statutory formula linked to their respective unemployment and poverty rates. [Feeding America](#), the third largest charity in the country, encourages food corporations to donate their food “waste³” to charity. Feeding America coordinates emergency food system supply chains and centralizes accounting procedures across the network (Lohnes 2021). Today there are more than 200 regional Food Banks that operate under the umbrella of Feeding America, along with its 77 partner distribution organizations, 53 independent Food Banks, and the 60,000+ food pantries, food shelves and soup kitchens across the country (Food Bank News 2020).

3 Feeding America defines food waste as food that is “safe, high-quality food that is thrown away rather than eaten” and reports that they have been “working with manufacturers, retailers, and farmers to reduce food waste and get rescued food to people in need.” They “identify food at risk of going to waste, offer rescued food to Food Banks, safely ship food over long distances and keep food fresh longer once it reaches a food bank.” (<https://www.feedingamerica.org/our-work/our-approach/reduce-food-waste>)

Although HROs are categorized as private, non-governmental organizations, they do benefit from federal support, most notably and directly through [The Emergency Food Assistance Program](#) (TEFAP) and indirectly through the [Good Samaritan Act](#). They also benefit from federal tax deductions which incentivize and protect businesses and corporations that donate food, time and money to HROs from liability. (USDA FNS 2020; USDA 2021a).

Historical context of the Emergency Food System

The advent of the private charitable emergency food system in the U.S. can be traced to the late 1960s. Food banking emerged from what could be construed as a logical match-up between food about to go to waste (because of expiring sell-by dates, lack of markets and/or over production) and people and families impacted by food insecurity. Grocery stores were early adopters, shored up with the promise of tax breaks and brand enhancement (O'Brien et al. 2004). Buttressed by the Tax Reform Act of 1976, corporations, such as Kellogg Co. and Beatrice Foods, also became donors to Food Banks, and developed partnerships to get food distributed. The food banking model relies heavily on this early scaffolding (Sullivan 2005; Ullman 1976).

Over time, services and programs have been added to address issues in persistent food insecurity that emerged as a result of the federal safety net being downsized coupled with stagnant wages (USDA 2018). Organized private charitable food assistance received a big boost in the 1980s. The prevailing ideology in Congress was that people living in the U.S. should be encouraged to “pull themselves up by their bootstraps,” and become self-reliant (Kristof 2020). Further, that food stamps and other “handouts” were a deterrent to the American spirit of ingenuity in service to the goal of self-reliance. The Food Stamp Program (now known as SNAP) was cut, and significant new restrictions around benefits were instituted in the 1980s (USDA 2018). Congressional legislation authorized the distribution of federal surplus commodities to non-profits that provided food to the needy through a program now called The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) (Congressional Research Service 2021).

TEFAP, which [provides federally purchased commodities and some cash support to Food Banks, food pantries, soup kitchens, shelters, and other types of emergency feeding organizations serving low-income households and individuals](#), is described by Feeding America as “[the backbone of the charitable food system](#).” (Congressional Research Service 2021; Feeding America 2018). TEFAP accounted for 20% of the food Feeding America was able to distribute through Food Banks and Frontline Organizations throughout the U.S. in 2018. And, according to the Congressional Research Service, in FY2020, TEFAP was appropriated at a level exceeding \$400 million to be administered by the states and distributed through the emergency food system, making up the largest source of federal support for HROs (TEFAP food comprised 14% of food distributed by the emergency food assistance system and TEFAP administrative funds comprised 12%-27% of organizations' operating expenses) (Congressional Research Service 2021). Despite the fact that most HROs are categorized by the IRS as private charities with a 501(c)3 designation, the emergency food system and the federal government are deeply intertwined as a means of repurposing food waste to feed hungry people. TEFAP was rolled out in 1981-1982 as a temporary program to address two problems: the need to dispose of “stockpiles of government-held food commodities” and a reduction in food stamps and other food assistance programs in the midst of an economic recession (Congressional Research Service 2021). TEFAP is now a permanent program with mandatory funding, contributing to the parastatal nature and institutionalization of the emergency food system.

The Great Recession created a new wave of hunger and food insecurity issues worldwide in the mid 2000s. In the U.S., funding for federal nutrition programs was in decline and food assistance benefits were tied to work requirements. SNAP participation reached a historic high of 28.2 million people in 2008 and continued to rise, reaching 47.6 million people by 2013 (USDA 2018). During this peak, [Closing the Hunger Gap](#) (CTHG) (ref) emerged as a network of organizations working to expand hunger relief efforts beyond food distribution towards strategies that promote social justice and address the root causes of hunger. The [last conference Closing the Hunger Gap](#) held in 2019 was attended

by more than a thousand people from almost every state in the country. The conference focused on sharing challenges and successes in developing and implementing strategies that recognized racialized poverty as the root causes of hunger while busting the “bootstraps” mythology as a solution to food insecurity. CTHG’s membership began to grow and strategies were developed to “challenge the narrative that the hungry will always be among us” while learning exchanges led to an eight-point checklist for organizational change from a charity model to a social justice model (CTHG 2021).

In March of 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic took hold and HROs quickly found themselves in disaster response mode (some for the first time) faced with a rapidly increasing food insecure population coupled with food supply disruptions. Shortly thereafter, WhyHunger and the Duke World Food Policy Center (WFPC) -- two institutions engaged in analyzing the root causes of hunger -- came together to survey and document HROs’ experience of the pandemic as well as the impact that experience could have on the possibilities of systemic change in the future. We were interested in documenting the ways in which HROs pivoted and were impacted by the challenge of meeting the exponential increase in need for food assistance because of COVID-19. And we wanted to investigate how these experiences shaped HROs’ understanding of the social and economic systems at play, specifically whether HROs envisioned a different response to the chronic ‘emergency’ food need of millions of households each year, and where the root cause solutions lay. Of course, the COVID-19 pandemic was a sudden emergency that brought unemployment and isolation and so we also aimed to highlight the ingenuity of HROs in tackling this crisis in nimble ways. Furthermore, we wanted to understand how and if the experience would lead HROs to a new or renewed commitment to disrupting the institutionalization of private, charitable food assistance.



Methods

Survey goals

The research team sought to understand the experience of non-profit anti-hunger organizations – what we term HROs – working to ensure access to food during COVID-19. We developed a survey instrument in partnership with a subset of leaders within Hunger Relief Organizations (HROs). The stated objectives of the survey were:

1. To document the actions, needs, barriers, and successes of organizations providing access to food during a pandemic.
 - Investigate how HROs are responding to the crisis/what they need to handle their response (i.e. funding, alleviation of restrictive policies, more advocacy, paid staff, more partners, etc.).
 - Investigate what operational practices or policy changes HROs had to make as a result of the crisis.
 - Investigate from where HROs are getting information about the impacts of COVID-19 and how to address issues in their respective operations and/or how they are sharing information out with others.
 - Investigate who they are networking with/and or from where they are receiving government (local, state, or federal) and private sector (e.g. retailers, food industry, private foundations) support.
2. To assess potential long-term shifts in organizational policies, practices, programs, and purpose as a result of providing food access during a pandemic.
 - Investigate how the crisis has shifted priorities and programs for HROs to underscore and/or point to different or new strategies aimed at addressing root causes of food insecurity.
 - Investigate if HROs are shifting to address root causes of food insecurity long-term as a result of the crisis.
3. To identify recommendations for systemic change in the emergency food system highlighted by this crisis and in local/state/federal policy to support those changes long-term.
 - Investigate what systemic issues are becoming more prominent as a result of COVID-19 and what changes they would recommend to address those issues long-term.

Survey distribution

We distributed an electronic survey to thousands of emergency food providers between the end of August 2020 and November 2020 through the following channels:

- The Closing the Hunger Gap email list of 500 organizations
- Posted in the Food Bank News monthly on-line publication
- E-mailed directly to CEOs and Communication Directors of all 200 Feeding America Food Banks
- Shared on WhyHunger’s social media platforms multiple times throughout the survey period.

Survey responses and organization categorization

A total of 242 Hunger Relief Organizations (HROs) from 39 states responded. Respondents self-selected one of the following three categories that best defined their organization: Food Bank, Frontline Organization, or Advocacy Organization.

Frontline Organizations: Community-based organizations providing food directly to people in need (i.e. food pantries, soup kitchens and food shelves)

Advocacy Organizations: Anti-hunger organizations that do not provide direct services but whose mission includes ending or lessening food insecurity

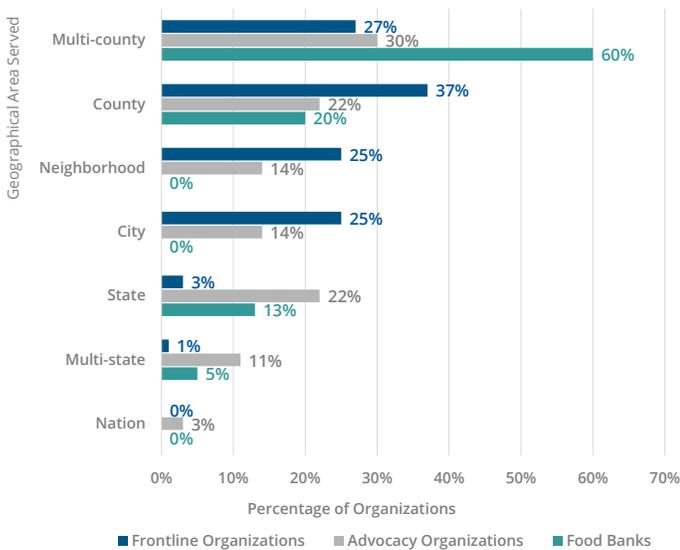
Food Banks: Organizations with storage facilities and trucks that procure and distribute food to Frontline Organizations and/or provide direct food access to people in need from their own location.

Data analysis and presentation

Survey data was cleaned and analyzed using R programming software. Open-ended questions were grouped and select quotes were included to enhance the context. The survey used convenience sampling and the results are representative of the respondents though may not be extrapolated to the whole population (especially for Frontline Organizations – there are more than 60,000 such organizations across the country and we only secured 133 respondents in that category). There were six ‘other’ organizations, which were excluded from the results of this survey because they were not providing hunger relief.

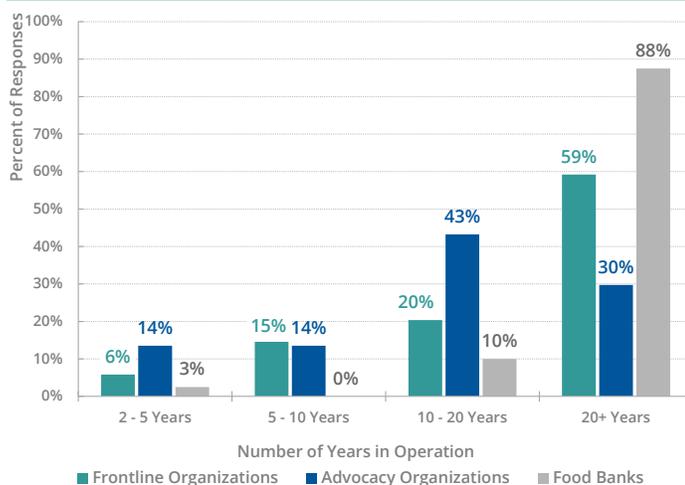
Survey Questions can be found in Appendix A.1 and results for each question, grouped by the type of organization, can be found in Appendix A.2. Throughout the report, we provide hyperlinked references to questions and source data (e.g. Q.1.2. which means the data being discussed is drawn from responses to question 1.2.).

Figure 3. Most HROs service a single county, or multiple counties.



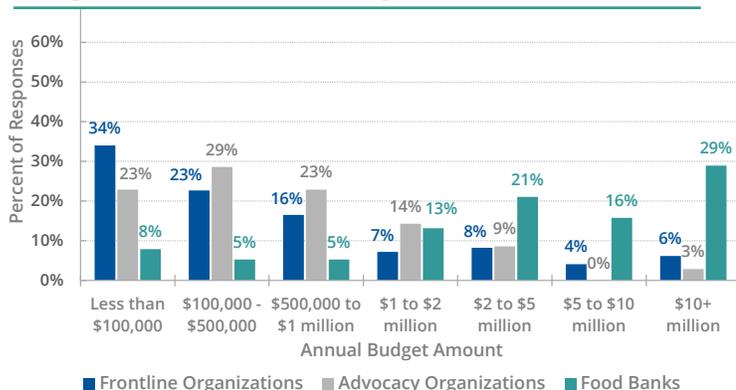
Source: survey question "Q.5.2"

Figure 4. The majority of Hunger Relief Organizations responding to the survey have been in operation 20 years or longer.



Source: survey question "Q.5.1"

Figure 5. Food Banks have considerably higher budgets than Frontline Organizations.



Source: survey question "Q.5.5"

Situational Context

Over the decades as Food Banks have become normalized pillars of private charitable social service in their communities, they have grown into sophisticated organizations focusing on efficiency in procurement and distribution, owning entire fleets of trucks, hundreds of staff -- some specializing in fundraising, others in logistics and still others in nutrition education or advocacy -- and CEO's that make six-figure salaries according to research presented in author/advocate Andy Fisher's *Big Hunger* (Fisher 2017).

Frontline Organizations, on the other hand, tend to be community-based with a small staff size of 20 or less, each usually serving more than one organizational function, and largely volunteer-driven. The grassroots nature of Frontline Organizations, in part, explains why their budgets are small and their fundraising capacity is limited. The policies and practices of the philanthropic sector offers another explanation. First, individual contributions make up the largest source of charitable funds received by non-profits. Combined with bequests, it accounts for more than three-quarters of total giving each year (Philanthropy Network 2017). Food Banks are more apt to capture those individual donations because they have the financial and staff capacity to invest in direct mail and other kinds of solicitations tailored to particular demographics. And large foundations are generally set up to work more efficiently with large non-profits who are staffed with seasoned development professionals, grant writers and evaluation teams (Ng 2021).

However, there is a recent trend in philanthropy to re-evaluate its requirements of potential grantees that often include sophisticated logic models, quantitative evaluation metrics, and non-renewable funding commitments. These shifts in philanthropic policies and practices are in response to the growing evidence that directly funding grassroots organizations is more impactful and much less riskier than assumed by large foundations (Ng 2021; Baykara 2016; Heisman 2021).



IMPACT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND HUNGER RELIEF ORGANIZATIONS (HRO) RESPONSE

HROs experienced increased demand for services, and saw more first-time clients, more unemployed clients, and clients from new socio-demographics

KEY FINDINGS

During the survey period, 79% of HROs saw an increase in demand for their existing services.

More than 85% of Food Banks and Frontline Organizations reported serving clients needing access to food assistance for the first time.

77% of Frontline Organizations and 85% of Food Banks indicated that they served a larger number of unemployed clients.

HROs completed the survey between August and November of 2020. The majority (79%) of HROs experienced a significant increase in demand for services (Figure 6.) (“Q.1.2”). Some reported no change (4%), or decreased demand (5%), while some reported fluctuating demand for their services (11%).

Furthermore, some HROs reported a fluctuation in demand more often than expected and in ways they couldn't predict. Several respondents commented on this phenomenon:

Very unpredictable. Some distributions high, some low, no pattern. With not having full in person, full choice model open we are serving less. We are seeing significant increase in NEW clients.

— Frontline Organization Respondent

...with our food pantry, we switched to drive-thru open distributions where folks could visit once a week from March through June. Saw a giant increase in individuals served. In July, transitioned back to once monthly appointments and have seen fewer folks than prior to COVID. With our fresh food distributions, slowed down when pantry had weekly open distributions but have returned to average numbers served.

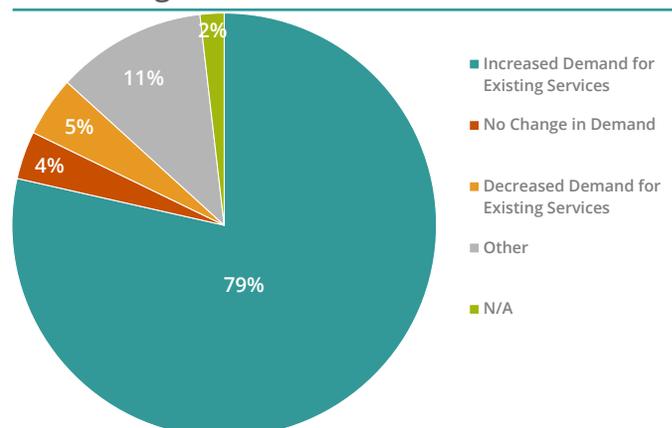
— Frontline Organization Respondent

[Demand has] increased, then decreased, now increasing again.

— Frontline Organization Respondent

Organizations indicated a notable increase in first-time clients, unemployed clients, individuals experiencing homelessness or housing issues, and individuals from outside the organization's usual service area. Figure 7. shows the different changes in client demographics across the Hunger Relief Organizations.

Figure 6. Hunger Relief Organizations overwhelmingly faced an increase in demand for existing services.



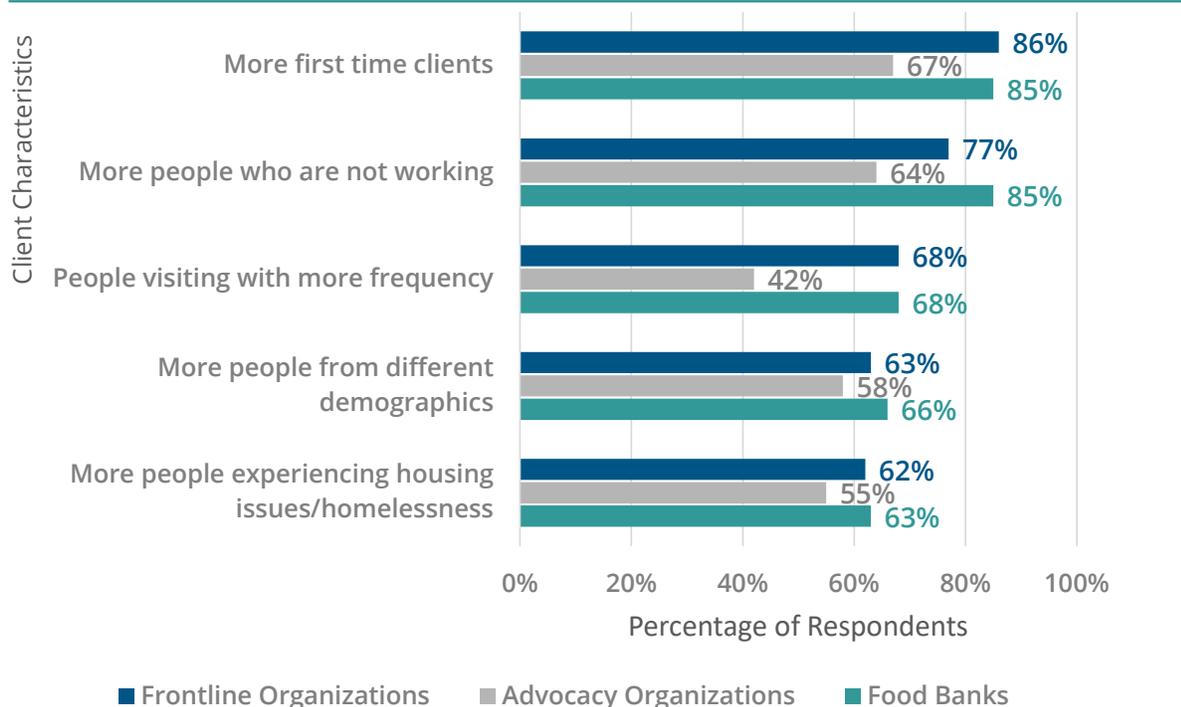
Source: survey question “Q.1.2”

Perhaps most striking is that over 60% of respondents reported serving people representing different demographics than their normal, pre-pandemic client-base. Some respondents explained the changes they experienced:

People are relying on our services who previously donated to our program.
 — Frontline Organization Respondent

Seeing more immigrants who in [the] past had several low wage jobs supporting the household. Now most have lost their jobs and are concerned about negative effects of applying for common financial supports that others in [the] community access. Like SNAP and unemployment.
 — Frontline Organization Respondent

Figure 7. Similar changes in client demographics were seen across all three types of Hunger Relief Organizations.



Source: survey question "Q.3.2"

Situational Context

During the early months of the pandemic, numerous news stories from across the country chronicled miles-long lines of cars and people waiting to receive pre-packed boxes and bags of food (Constantino 2020; Crane 2020; Guggenheimer 2020; Vesoulis 2020; Snow and Mone 2020). As context, the USDA Economic Research Service reported that 16.4% of households experiencing unemployment because of the pandemic were food insecure in December of 2020--just after the WFPC/WhyHunger survey was administered. (The Bureau of Labor documented a record high of 14.7% unemployment in April of 2020). The USDA also reported that among children, food insecurity and very low food security increased significantly from 2019. Both children and adults were food insecure in 7.6% of U.S. households with children in 2020 (up from 6.5% in 2019); very low food security among children reached 0.8% (up from 0.6% in 2019) (Coleman-Jensen et al. 2021).

An [independent survey of 2000 people conducted in October 2020](#) commissioned by the Danone company called Two Good Yogurt and administered by the One Poll marketing research company found that 4 in 10 people living in the U.S. reported that they experienced food insecurity for the first time during the Covid-19 pandemic (50% said they struggled to afford food, while 37% reported skipping meals themselves so there was enough food for their children to eat). Perhaps the most salient finding of the Danone study was that 63% said they didn't realize they were experiencing food insecurity, suggesting that the percentage of those experiencing food insecurity in the U.S. at the height of the pandemic might be under-reported, especially if those individuals did not seek emergency food from HROs or apply for SNAP.

The experience of HROs in this survey indicating that the number of first-time clients was significant and is consistent with reports outside this study indicating that Food Banks and Frontline Organizations were a necessary supplement to federal safety net programs that were critical but insufficient. Feeding America, which served 4.2 billion meals from March through October 2020, reported a 60% average increase in food bank users during the pandemic with 4 out of 10 being first-timers (Leonhardt 2020).



HROs adapted operations to meet client needs during the COVID-19 pandemic

KEY FINDINGS

98% of HROs responding to the survey stayed open, but had to make shifts in operations to adapt, such as safety precautions, pausing in-person programming, and creating new programs to meet the increased demand.

63% of the Frontline Organizations started curbside pickup, and 55% started delivery or drop off.

Between 25-35% of HROs reported that volunteers and staff contracted the COVID-19 virus.

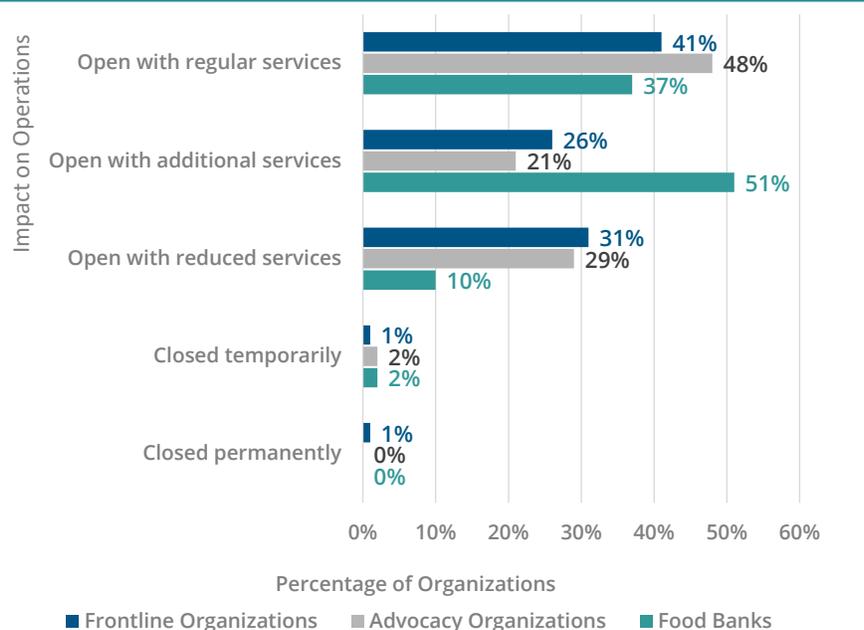
The majority of HROs don't plan to continue pandemic-necessitated operational shifts, especially those that reduce client choice.

For HROs, the COVID-19 pandemic created unprecedented challenges. With mandated lock downs causing spikes in unemployment, schools and daycare closures, and disruptions to the food supply chain, the need for hunger alleviation spiked dramatically. In addition, the COVID-19 virus is a highly transmissible airborne pathogen and HROs had to adjust operations to protect staff, volunteers and clients from infection. Despite such challenges, 98% of HROs responding to the survey reported that they had plans to remain open, with variability in whether

the organization could offer regular services, new services, or reduced services ("[Q.0.2](#)" & "[Q.0.3](#)"). Over 50% of Food Banks remained open and also offered additional services. In contrast, roughly 30% of the Frontline and Advocacy Organizations remained open but had to reduce their services. See Figure 8.

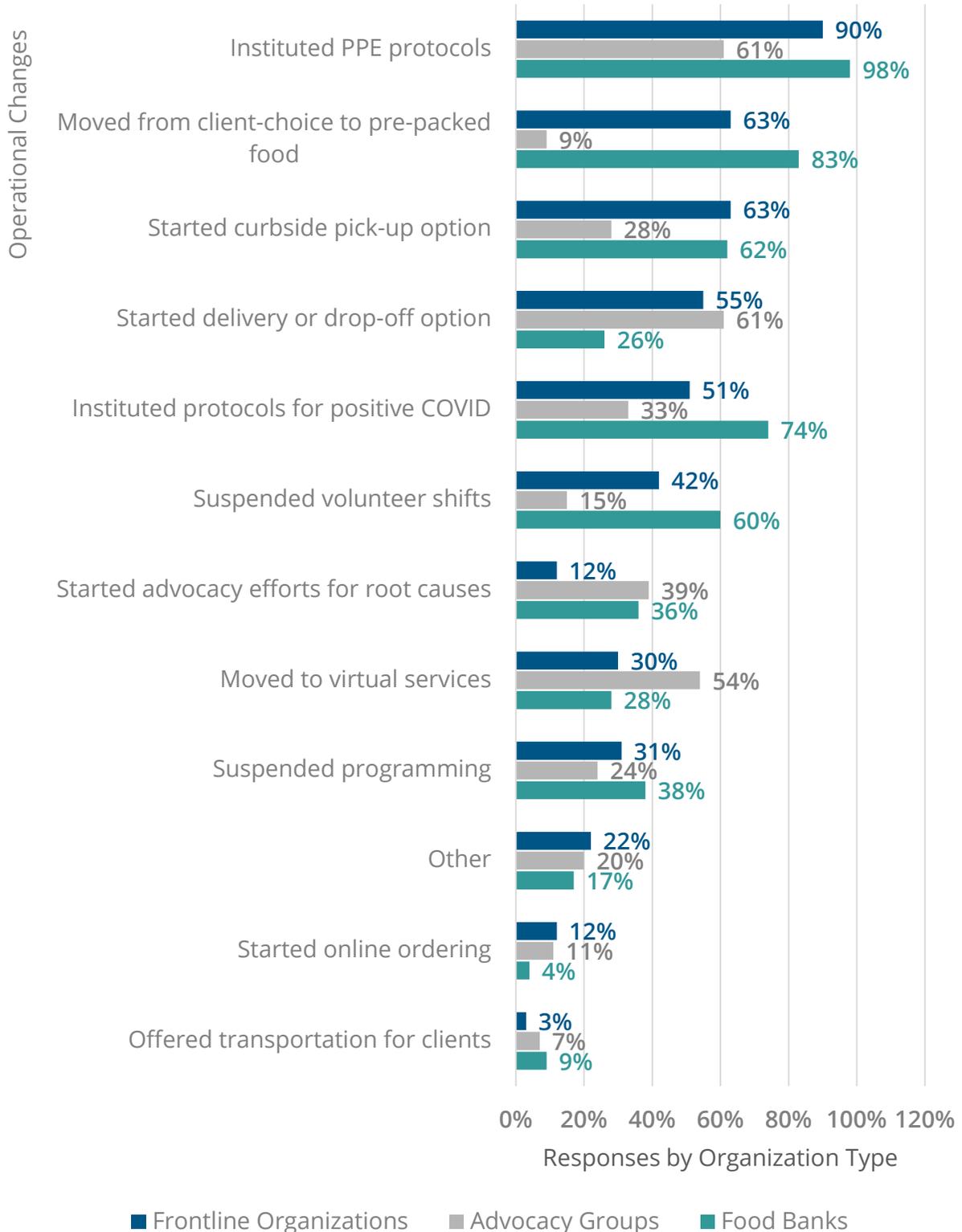
In order to address increased demand for services with safety precautions, Figure 9. shows how HROs changed their operations to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure 8. Most HROs were able to continue regular services, and more than a quarter of organizations offered additional services



Source: survey question "[Q.0.2](#)"

Figure 9. Safety protocols, less client choice in food, and changes to delivery options dominated hunger relief organization operational changes.



Source: survey question "Q.1.3."

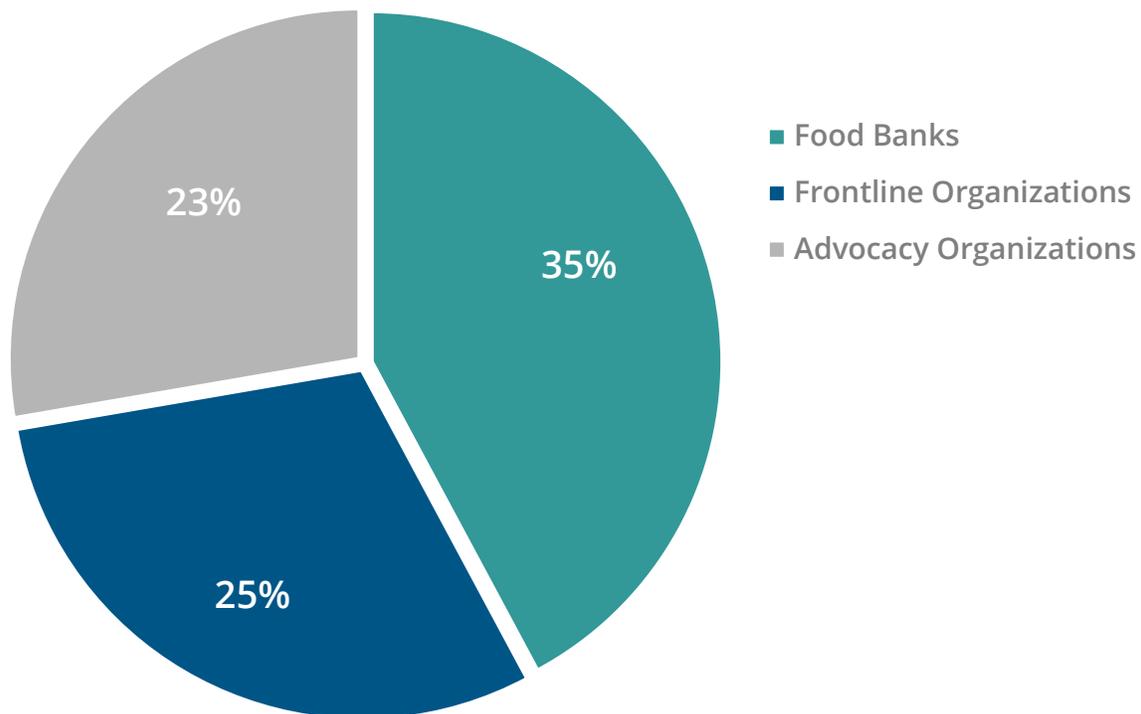
Safety protocols were implemented to protect clients, staff, and volunteers

Over 90% of the client-facing HROs instituted personal protective equipment (PPE) protocols. Eighty-one percent of Food Banks, 78% of Frontline Organizations, and 69% of Advocacy Organizations indicated they had extremely or moderately adequate access to PPEs. HROs primarily either purchased PPE or obtained them through donations ([“Q.4.5”](#)) About half of Frontline Organizations and 74% of Food Banks created protocols to handle positive COVID-19 cases.

Despite precautions, more than a third of Food Banks reported that volunteers and staff contracted COVID-19 during the survey period. And roughly a quarter of volunteers and staff at Frontline Organizations and Advocacy Organizations contracted COVID-19. Note: This survey did not seek to identify where HRO staff and volunteers were exposed to the virus. ([“Q.4.3”](#)). (See Figure 10.)

In deciding which safety protocols to follow, public health departments were the primary source of information about pandemic safety measures and how to pivot practices ([“Q.2.2”](#)). Other sources included local, organized meetings with other social service providers, food bank networks, and listservs. Food Banks and Frontline Organizations were most likely to get information directly from public health departments (74% and 71% respectively). Advocacy Organizations received information more from local organized meetings with other providers (68%), as did 64% of Food Banks. Food bank networks were a significant information resource for Food Banks (62%) and Frontline Organizations (51%). Listservs were most helpful to Advocacy Organizations (45%), and less so to Frontline Organizations (20%) and Food Banks (10%).

Figure 10. HROs reported that on average one third of their volunteers and staff contracted the COVID-19 virus.



Source: survey question [“Q.4.3”](#)

Many in-person programs were suspended or converted to virtual offerings

HROs suspended some of their programs during the pandemic, primarily in-person programs. The rationale for the changes was keeping clients, volunteers, and staff safe. (“Q.1.5”) Examples of suspended programs included culinary training, cooking classes, gardening programs, nutrition education classes, after-school programs, and backpack programs. Non-food social service support, such as clothing donations, job training, etc., were also among programs some organizations suspended (“Q.1.5”). Some programs usually conducted in person were offered virtually or via social distancing, as explained in the next section.

Since indoor dining posed a big risk for contracting and transmitting the COVID-19 virus (and in many locations was prohibited by local authorities instituting lockdown rules), HROs suspended many in-person meal service programs such as congregate meals and soup kitchens with on-site seating. This might have contributed to feelings of isolation and loneliness among those who regularly used these services, as reported by some of the respondents.

Seeing more people with mental health issues; seeing more people that lost their jobs and are not able to find a new one due to the lack of education, experience, or skills; seeing more seniors experiencing isolation and loneliness; seeing more seniors that are considered home-bound due to self isolation.

— Frontline Organization Survey Respondent

HROs made logistical and programmatic changes to meet the need

The majority of the organizations implemented logistical changes in order to address issues revealed by the pandemic (Table 1.). Eighty-three percent of Food Banks and 63% of Frontline Organizations moved from client-choice to pre-packed boxes. Over 60% of both of these HRO types started curbside pick-up. Over half of them started delivery/drop-off services.

Serving non-resident employees of our county's businesses. It may help us better understand which businesses have people working that still need assistance (the employer gives the employee a voucher with the business name on it). It supports the businesses that were unable to get the normal labor pool they desperately need so they can stay open and staffed. And, it helps the employee that wants to work, but may still need help. Most pantries are not open like a grocery store would be. They have limited hours and/or days. So, you could be working here, or traveling to and from your job here, and miss being served in your home county's pantry. Hopefully, this program helps us keep people fed while understanding where the most advocacy is needed for living wages.
 — Frontline Organization Respondent

Table 1. Summary of different programs and infrastructure changes implemented during the pandemic.

PROGRAMMATIC CHANGES	SPECIFIC EXAMPLES
DELIVERY SERVICES	Home delivery, including delivery specifically for seniors, the homeless, immunocompromised, and immigrants
EXPANSION OF SERVICES	Open longer hours/ more days Increase in geographic service area Addition of mobile pantries, online ordering, pre-packed food, curbside food, neighborhood fridges, meal production
BOXED DISTRIBUTIONS	CFAP/Farmers to Families Food boxes CSA Boxes
ONLINE SERVICES	Online ordering, virtual meetings Online trainings

Source: Survey question "Q.3.3"

HROs do not plan to continue with pandemic-necessitated changes, especially those that affect client dignity

The survey probed for the kinds of operational or policy changes HROs implemented ("Q.1.3.1"), and which ones they planned to continue beyond the pandemic ("Q.1.4"). HROs pivoted to new contactless or limited contact safety solutions for providing food to an increasing volume of clients, such as curbside pick-up, pre-packed food, delivery or drop-off options, and increased PPE protocols. As Table 2. displays, client-facing

HROs (Food Banks and Frontline orgs) do not plan to continue distributing pre-packed foods or curbside pick-up options beyond the pandemic, whereas services such as virtual offerings, transportation for clients, and online ordering are planned to be sustained.

Table 2. Most of the service changes made during the survey period will not be continued as the pandemic-related need for food lessens over time.

	FOOD BANK		FRONTLINE ORGS	
	SERVICE CHANGE	% PLANNING TO CONTINUE CHANGE?	SERVICE CHANGE	% PLANNING TO CONTINUE CHANGE?
Moved from client-choice to pre-packed food	83%	11%	63%	16%
Started curbside pick-up option	62%	26%	63%	34%
Moved to virtual services	28%	21%	30%	19%
Started delivery or drop-off option	26%	38%	55%	32%
Offered transportation for clients	9%	6%	3%	3%
Started online ordering	4%	0%	12%	18%
Started policy and advocacy efforts to address root causes	36%	32%	12%	13%

Source: survey question "Q.1.3." and "Q.1.4"

Situational Context

Most HROs -- especially Food Banks and Frontline Organizations -- have evolved significantly since the early days of charitable food distribution when emergency relief was the primary focus; that is, providing the most caloric intake to the largest number of hungry people in the fastest way possible. As the Emergency Food System sector has grown and Food Banks have proliferated, the needs of food insecure communities have changed. The phenomenon of persistent poverty communities spurred by a widening divide between the rich and the poor, wages that have not kept pace with inflation and the rising costs of housing and healthcare, a steady increase in the marketing and accessibility of highly processed foods, especially in [low income and communities of color](#), has helped to cement the role of HROs in addressing the chronic need for charitable food. As a result, many Food Banks and Frontline Organizations -- pre-pandemic -- had begun to implement programs to address the diet-related health concerns of chronically low-income families through creative methods of providing food assistance with the dignity and humanity of clients at the center.

Almost all HROs understand the need to provide healthier choices and fresh foods and have adapted

their facilities or programs to scale up the amount of fresh, whole foods they can provide as well as more dignified means of accessing food. Most notably, some organizations have instituted a [client-choice model](#), such as the [SODO Community Market run by Northwest Harvest in Seattle, WA](#), that encourages clients to "shop" within the food pantry and choose the ingredients they will take home to prepare meals for their families. Others, such as the [Food Bank of Western Massachusetts](#), offer nutrition education and meal preparation classes using foods that are available at the pantry. Some offer gardening space, tools and seeds for clients to grow some of their own food ([Mother Hubbard's Cupboard in Bloomington, IN](#)). Still others have expanded to provide a variety of social services such as help with enrolling in federal safety net programs, job training skills, diner-like settings for communal meals, and political organizing and advocacy ([Neighbors Together's Community Action Program in Brooklyn, NY](#)). Some have embraced a "food as medicine" philosophy, such as [God's Love We Deliver in New York City](#), and work directly with community health practitioners to offer veggie prescriptions for use at farmers markets, or provide medically-tailored meals to clients with cancer, AIDS or diabetes.

Increased funding, existing relationships, improved communications & coordination were key to successful pandemic response

KEY FINDINGS

As contributions to success, 83% of HROs cited pre-established relationships with funders, 75% of HROs selected increased local and regional coordination, and 72% of HROs identified short-term increases in philanthropic funding.

Majority of the HROs experienced increase in funding from different sources, the top 2 being philanthropic and individual donations. Over 80% of Food Banks experienced increase in philanthropic and individual funding, over 60% of Food Banks had increased state, federal, and corporate funding.

Among the different types of HROs, Food Banks reported receiving increased funding at higher levels than other types of HROs. Many HROs commented on the need for greater sustainability and equity in future funding mechanisms.

More than 70% of HROs cited communication and operational coordination between HROs and their funders, farmers and growers, and other stakeholders as a key to success.

The survey probed for factors contributing to the success of HROs during the pandemic. Several factors enabled “successful” operations, such as being able to maintain or grow operations to adapt to the need during the pandemic (Figure 11.); new or existing relationships with funders; increase in philanthropic funding; relationships with farmers/grower; and increased coordination with multiple stakeholders, such as non-client groups, partners, donors, etc. Write-in responses for the “Other” category included the combination of old and new relationships, communication with community, and staff efforts as key elements of successful operation during the survey period.

More than 70% of HRO respondents indicated increased communication and increased operational coordination between organizations, local food providers, farmers and growers, and other stakeholders contributed to successful pandemic response (“Q.2.1”). Some comments highlight the ingenuity of HROs and other organizations to meet the heightened need during the pandemic.

We also have a weekend food program along with our donate what you can cafe. When schools closed we met new challenges to reach our children with food as they were not in school. The challenges of transportation and reaching the most vulnerable and in need became more serious as those without transportation may not be reached and need it the most. We worked with our local schools to provide summer meals in partnership with the lunch programs at the schools by riding with the buses to reach our children. School begins virtual here this year so we face the same challenge of reaching our most vulnerable in their homes when not in school. This requires partnership again with our schools and asking more volunteers to help deliver to reach our children. This has been a challenge but we made it work together. 40% of our hope pack weekend meals have been delivered to our children since schools closed in March. We shared over 35,000 hope pack weekend food packs to our children during this past school calendar year.

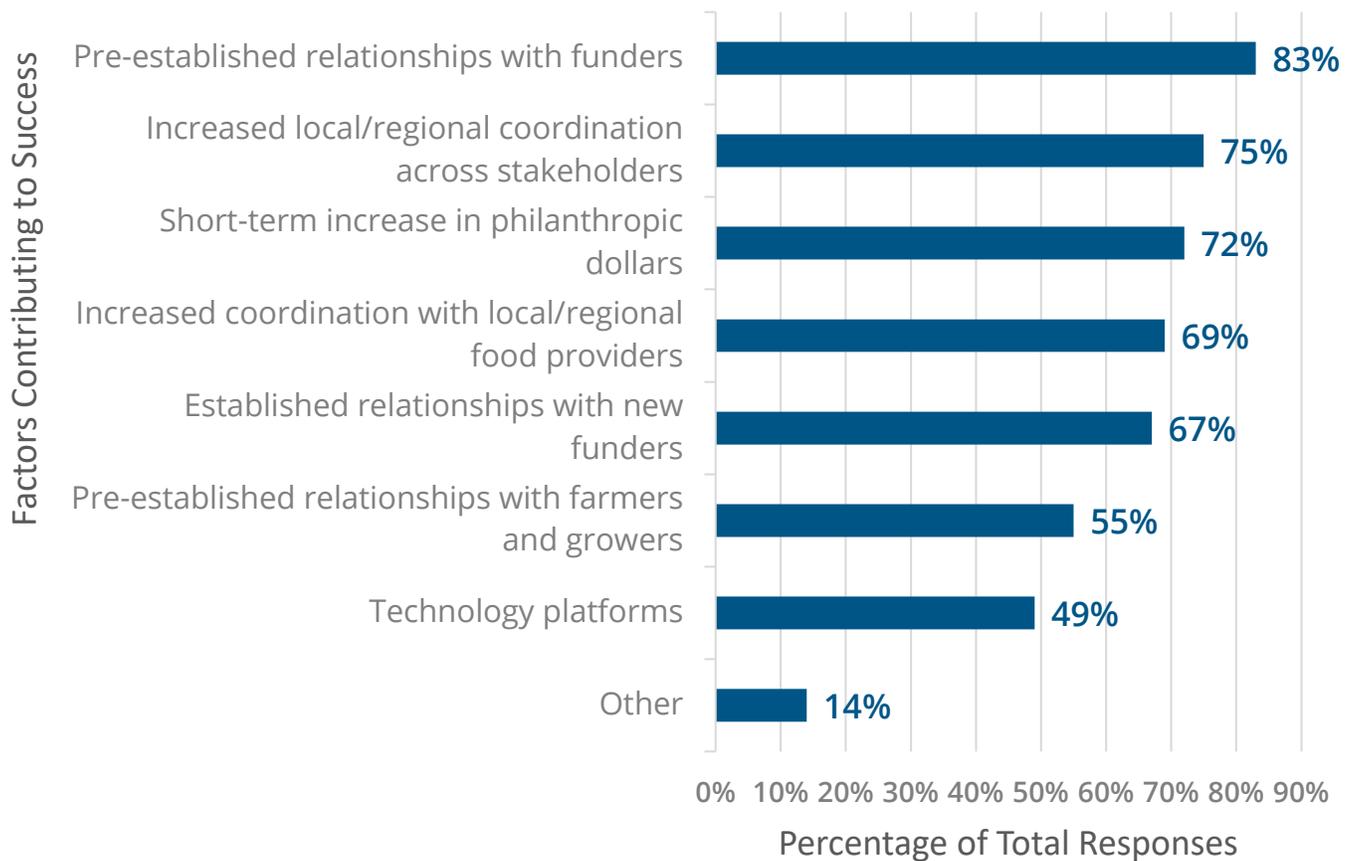
— Frontline Organization Respondent

We have already made additional connections with local grocery chain stores through Feeding America that will continue to and are now providing us with additional food items to meet the increased demand in our area.

— Frontline Organization Respondent

At the same time, many HROs brought up the possibility of improved networks and coordination, which we will present in the next section of this report.

Figure 11. HROs cited relationship, funding and coordination as keys to success during the pandemic.

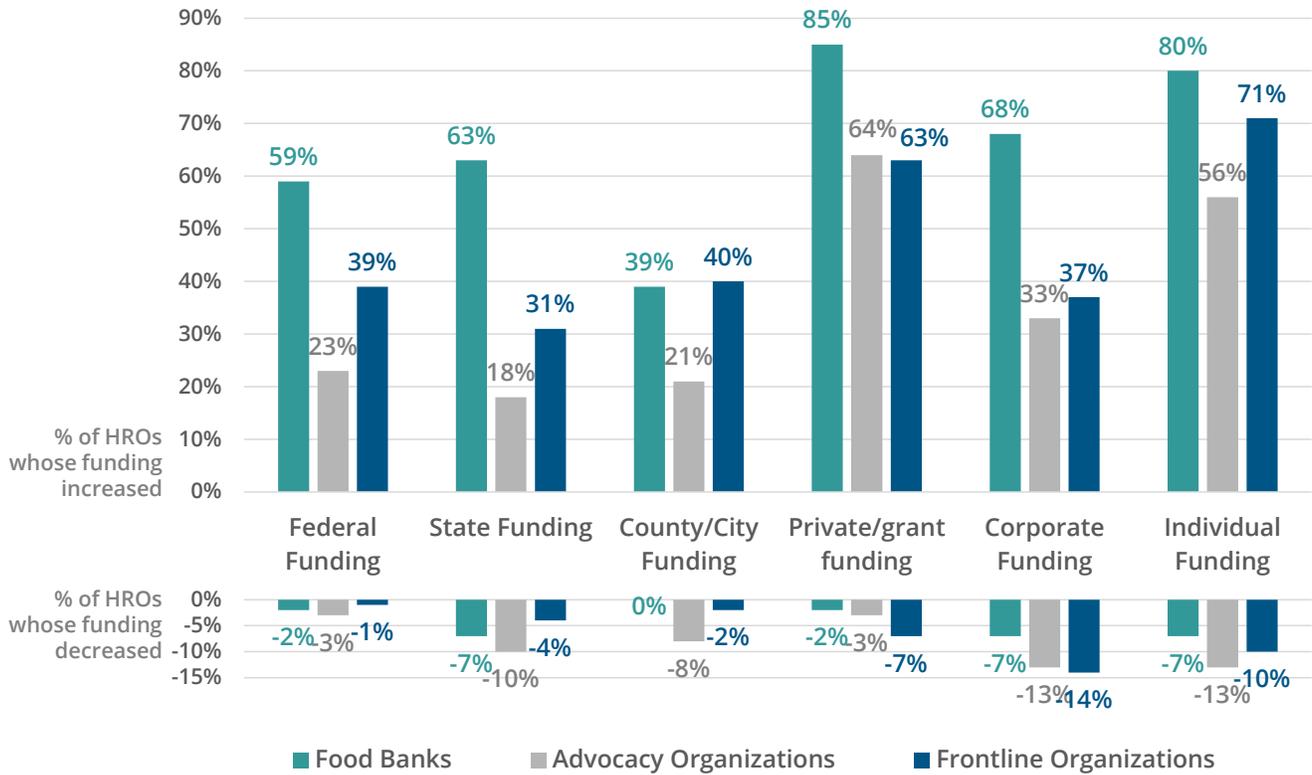


Source: survey question [“Q.2.1”](#)

Funding for hunger relief surged, with Food Banks as the largest recipients

Across the board, HRO respondents saw substantial increases in funding (Figure 12.) as individual donors, government agencies, foundations and corporations sought to help address the escalating need for emergency food assistance.

Figure 12. The vast majority of HROs saw their funding increase during the survey period.



Source: survey data

Situational Context

The increase in funding reported by the respondents is consistent with the general trend of a rapid and steep growth in charitable giving as a result of the pandemic. A report by the Center for Disaster Philanthropy (CDP) and Candid published in August 2020 found that during the first half of 2020, the \$11.9 billion given in response to the COVID-19 pandemic far exceeded philanthropic contributions for previous disasters. The report, *Philanthropy and COVID-19 in the First Half of 2020*, reveals that foundations and individual donors stepped up to meet immediate needs and services arising from the pandemic (CDP 2020).

Many non-profits struggled to meet their fundraising goals in 2020 due to the need to cancel in-person galas and fundraising events, according to the Association of Fundraising Professionals (AFP 2020). But donations to some small and mid-sized charitable organizations were up 7.6% in the first nine months of 2020 over 2019, according to the association's analysis, which tracks nearly 2,500 groups. And, the number of donors was up by 11.7%. GivingTuesday, a decade-old fundraising tradition that takes place the first Tuesday after Thanksgiving, experienced a 25% increase in giving in 2020 compared to 2019.

America's Food Fund, started in response to the pandemic, raised over \$44 million on GoFundMe, the largest campaign ever on the fundraising website to "keep neighbors fed." Donations went to five Hunger Relief Organizations (HROs), including Feeding America, The World Central Kitchen, Save the Children, No Kid Hungry, and the Urban School Food Alliance (America's Food Fund).

The CDP report and others (McKinsey 2020) which focused on philanthropic trends as a result of COVID-19, found that foundations and philanthropy in general adjusted their practices in response to the pandemic in the following ways:

- Awarded more unrestricted support providing flexibility to use funding where it is needed most.
- Allowed current grantees to shift restricted grants to general operating support.
- Gave additional grants for evolving and emergent needs.



HROs also provided feedback regarding the funding structures

The majority of the HROs considered pre-established relationships with funders as a contributor to their success (through rapid response funding) (“Q.2.1”). However, Frontline Organizations noted an ongoing problem - the outsized proportion of funding directed towards Food Banks:

National and State agencies and large corporations too often only connect with the large Food Banks and far too often the funding that is given to those agencies falls far short of getting to the frontline agencies that do the work in the trenches. There needs to be change in some of those funding lines or trends and more needs to be done to help the smaller local pantries.

— Frontline Organization Respondent

At the same time many organizations had concerns about the sustainability of the funding levels, revealing an operational precarity of depending on philanthropic funding. One respondent commented:

We have received more donations than normal this year, but we are concerned about what funding will look like in the long term. Giving has already slowed. Will we be able to sustain our work next year?”

— Advocacy Organization Member

In addition, some HROs mentioned the challenges of trying to fit into funder’s timelines and reporting requirements as follows (“Q.2.8”):

We are the organizations doing this work; if you want to fund us, trust us to know how to best utilize those funds. Stop dictating how funds are used, stop setting unrealistic time restraints and making us use measurements that count weight more than actual results! Untie our hands.

— Food Bank Member

Create and maintain funding streams that encourage collaboration among organizations rather than forcing them to compete in a zero-sum game.

— Advocacy Organization Member

Situational Context

A survey of 236 foundations, completed by the Center for Effective Philanthropy, showed that a majority of foundations significantly changed practices in response to COVID-19, including greater flexibility with application and reporting processes, converting funds already awarded to unrestricted funding, and establishing emergency funds. Most foundation leaders indicated that they intend to maintain these practices post-COVID but the report cautioned that it’s too soon to know if these reforms will stick (CEP 2020). Small to midsize organizations – the Frontline Organizations in this study – are hoping for a permanent shift that will allow them to pivot more easily when needs arise as well as to have fewer hoops to jump through to acquire funding in the first place.

Biggest challenges HROs faced were loss of volunteers, logistical and infrastructure issues hampering access to fresh foods, and lack of coordinated government response to pandemic-related food insecurity

KEY FINDINGS

Overall the biggest challenge for HROs was loss of volunteer base due to COVID risk. Over 80% of Food Banks and over 60% of other HROs lost volunteers initially. At the same time, 75% of Food Banks were able to hire more staff to compensate for this sudden reduction in workforce.

Around 60% of HROs rated a lack of refrigeration space for perishable food and space for shelf-stable food as critical limitations and barriers. In addition, over 60% of Food Banks and Frontline Organizations reported concerns about lack of transportation for clients to receive food.

HROs struggled with the lack of coordination, consistency, and predictability of the government's response to the pandemic.

The survey asked Hunger Relief Organizations to identify challenges with which they were dealing or had overcome during the survey period of the pandemic. (Figure 13.)

HROs experienced a sudden loss of volunteers and cited dependence on volunteers as an ongoing challenge

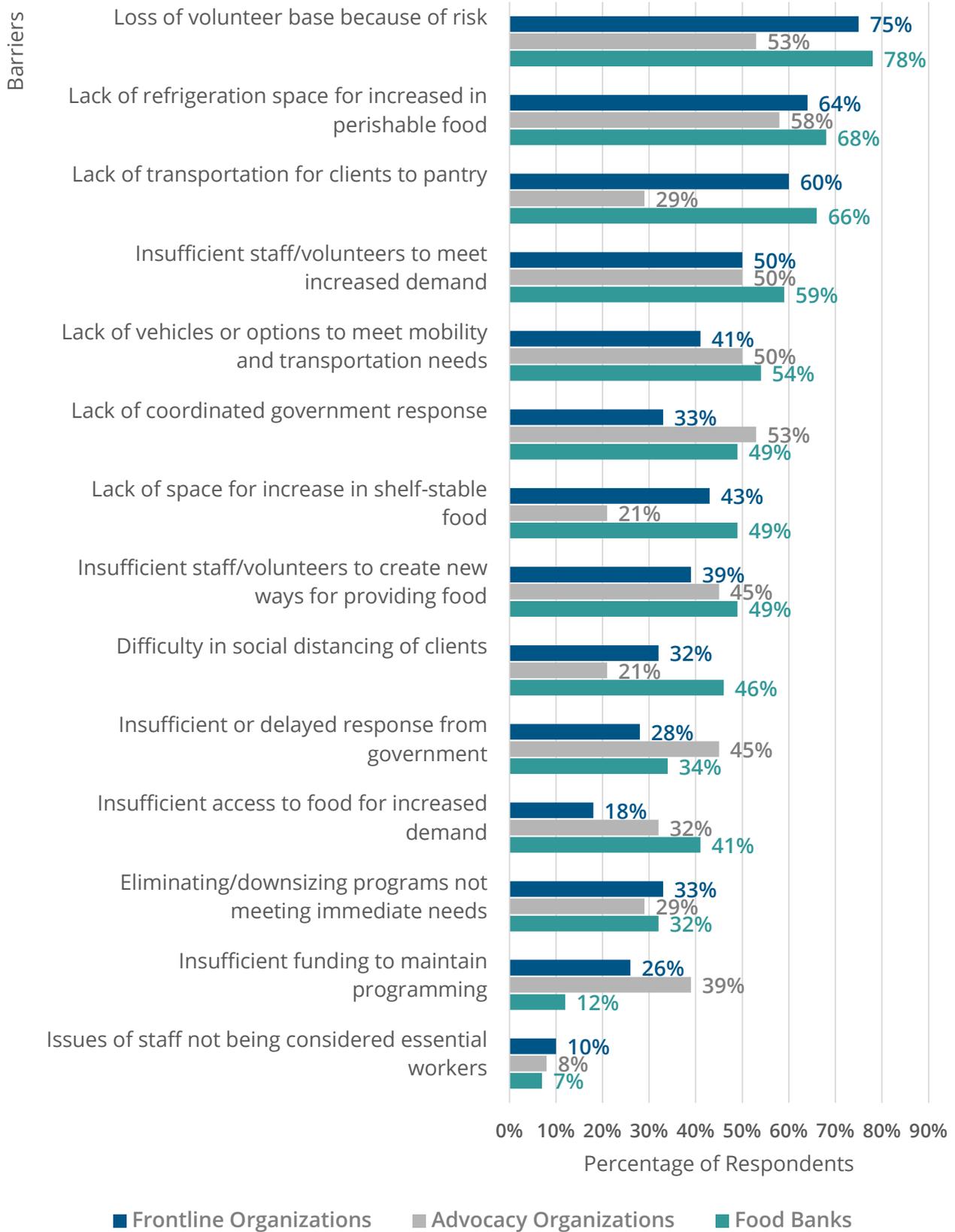
Many HROs, but especially Food Banks and Frontline Organizations rely heavily on volunteer staffing. The loss of volunteer base due to health risk, especially at the beginning of the pandemic, was the barrier cited most often. Figure 14. compiles data from different questions to show the struggle with fewer volunteer workers, and the dependence on the volunteers as an identified weakness of the emergency food system. All organizations experienced a loss of volunteer support to staff operations.

A third of all HROs in the survey indicated they compensated for the lack of volunteers by hiring more staff. Fifty percent of Food Banks, 27% of Frontline and 22% of Advocacy Organizations reported they had more paid staff compared to pre-pandemic days. (["Q.4.1"](#) and ["Q.4.2"](#))

We were blessed that we had a strong, creative team who could adjust very quickly to keep everyone safe while serving more folks. But we were lucky. Hunger relief is pretty dependent on retirees (but people are retiring later), dependent on churches (but fewer people are religious), and those of us in the field are tired. Covid made our value more obvious to the general public but the future of the food system, especially the charitable arm of it, is precarious.

— Frontline Organization Respondent

Figure 13. All HROs faced similar challenges in responding to pandemic-related surge in demand for services.



Source: survey question "Q.2.4"

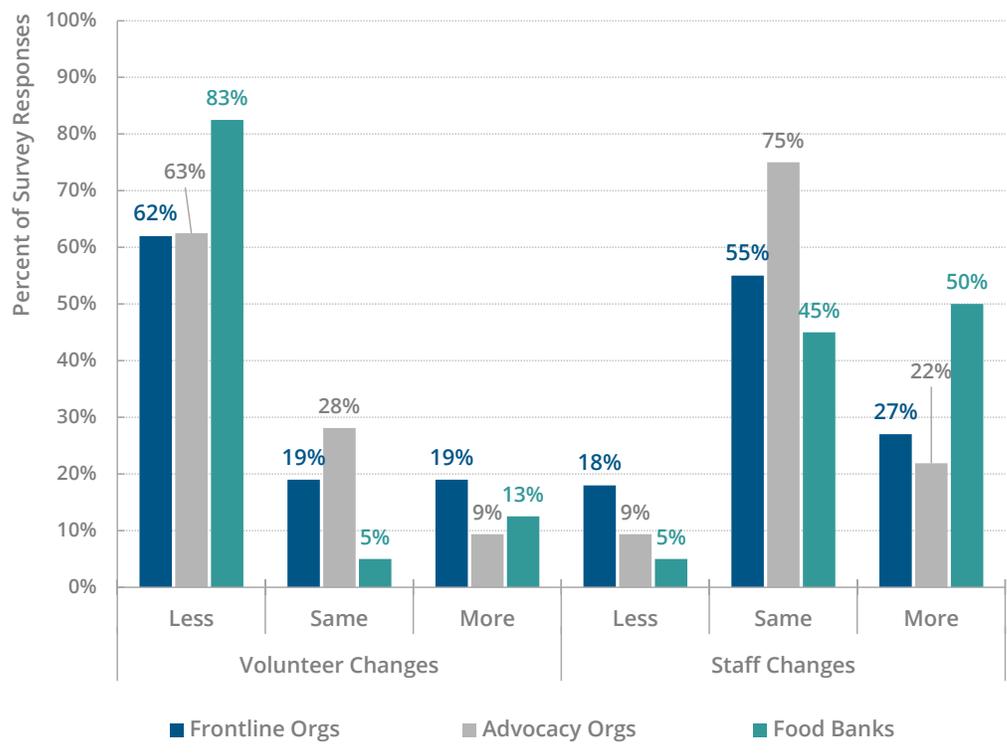
Figure 14. HROs struggled with fewer volunteer workers, and identify dependence on volunteers as an ongoing, challenging barrier



Source: survey questions "[Q.2.3](#)", "[Q.2.4](#)", "[Q.4.1](#)", "[Q.4.2](#)"

The issue of whether Hunger Relief Organization (HRO) workers are paid staff or volunteers speaks to the precarity of these organizations as they respond to community needs. (Figure 15.) Over 80% of Food Banks and over 60% of Frontline and Advocacy Organizations operated with fewer volunteers compared to pre-pandemic times. Unsurprisingly, all three types of organizations identified dependence on volunteer staff as a critical weakness in the emergency food system. (“Q.2.3”)

Figure 15. Majority of the HROs grappled with significant loss of volunteers



Source: survey questions “Q.4.1” and “Q.4.2”

Situational Context

According to Feeding America, 51% of all Food Banks and Frontline Organizations rely primarily on volunteers (Feeding America). Food Bank members of Feeding America regularly welcome more than 2 million volunteers every year. Volunteers provide unpaid labor for sorting and packing food, checking in clients and helping them “shop,” and delivering meals. Soup kitchens rely on volunteers to cook meals, serve clients and clean up. Other volunteer responsibilities include fundraising and solicitation of food donations. Volunteerism is a hallmark of U.S. culture and, as the French political philosopher Alexis de Toqueville detailed in his opus *Democracy in America* in the early 1800s, civic engagement was baked into the foundation of this emergent society that centered freedom and individualism (Tocqueville 1805).

The loss of volunteers that HROs experienced due to COVID-19 was mirrored across the nonprofit sector in general. A recent study by Fidelity Charitable, the largest grantmaker in the U.S., found that two out of every three volunteers decreased the time they spent volunteering or stopped contributing time altogether due to the pandemic (Fidelity Charitable 2021). Of those who continued to volunteer, a majority turned to virtual or remote opportunities, compared to 81% of people who volunteered in-person before the pandemic.

Most volunteers at HROs are seniors. In April 2020, when Marketplace host Kai Ryssdal spoke to Claire Babineaux-Fontenot, CEO of Feeding America, she told Ryssdal that “the majority of our 2 million volunteers in normal times are over 70 years old.” (Fam 2020). She further explained that she would never want a volunteer to risk their own health during the pandemic to come in, but the loss of many older volunteers was causing “an additional headwind for us.” We would speculate that the COVID-19 risk factor for older people, in addition to lock-down orders, likely drove the reduction in the number of volunteers.

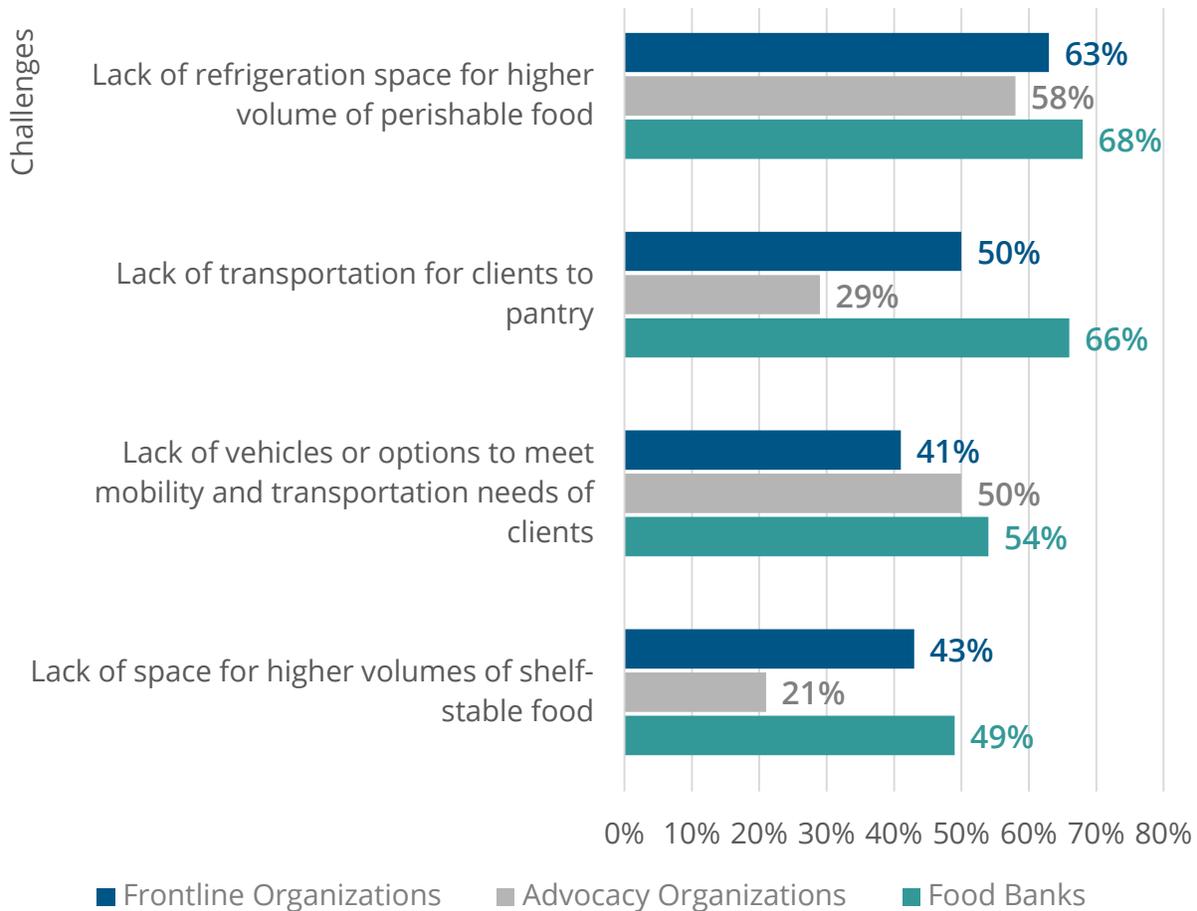


Lack of refrigerated and shelf-stable food storage, and delivery options impacted ability to provide fresh foods

During the survey period, HROs struggled to handle the volume of both perishable and shelf-stable food moving through their facilities. (Figure 16.) Over the past decades, as Food Banks laid down bricks and mortar and began to serve more and more people, their infrastructure also grew in reach and sophistication in order to respond to the escalating donations of food from corporations and government commodity programs and the need to redistribute the food efficiently to those in need (Powers, Snow, and Babb 2017). Much of what is donated from

corporations are items considered by companies as “food waste” because they were not purchased by consumers for any number of reasons: overproduction, past sell-by date, unpopular with the general public, etc. Additionally, the vast majority of food items donated in bulk to Food Banks are generally non-perishable with a long and stable shelf-life.

Figure 16. HROs struggled with more perishable food than they could handle and limited options to get food to low-mobility clients.



Source: survey question “Q.2.4”

Situational Context

Processing foods for human consumption has evolved in step with human's social, political and economic evolution. From washing vegetables pulled from the ground and cooking them over heat to canning and freezing fresh fruits and vegetables for use throughout the winter to adding dyes, preservatives and chemicals to prolong the use of products is a part of our human history (Kim 2013). Just after World War I, processed foods experienced a surge in development and sales fueled by a marketing campaign promising to make the "American housewife's" life easier (The Spruce Eats 2021; NWHM 2017). Pre-packaged frozen meals came onto the scene after World War II. In the past fifty years ultra-processed foods and fast foods have taken up a larger portion of the market share and of the American diet. Today more than 60% of the U.S. diet consists of highly processed foods, and the U.S. Food Processing Industry is valued at \$750 billion (Poti et al. 2015; Pollock Orora 2015). Ultra processed foods, according to Harvard Health, "are made mostly from substances extracted from foods, such as fats, starches, added sugars, and hydrogenated fats (McManus 2020). They may also contain additives like artificial colors and flavors or stabilizers. Examples of these foods are frozen meals, soft drinks, hot dogs and cold cuts, fast food, packaged cookies, cakes, and salty snacks."

Keeping pace with the sheer volume and ease of accessing ultra-processed foods, is the decline in the health of U.S. citizens. According to a 2019 article published in the American Journal of Lifestyle Medicine, 71% of U.S. inhabitants are now considered obese or overweight (Fuhrman 2018). And eating processed foods and fast foods may kill more people prematurely than cigarette smoking. The article argues that low-income people of color living in areas with a reduced availability of fresh fruits and vegetables are the most impacted by chronic diet-related disease. They end up having 7 times the risk of stroke before age 45, double the risk of diabetes and heart attacks, and four times the risk of renal failure (HHS OMH 2021). The demographics of those at high risk of death from diet-related disease mirror the demographics of those who have to rely on HROs.

As a comprehensive report published by WhyHunger has chronicled, the effectiveness of a focus on efficient distribution of corporate food waste by Food Banks led to prioritizing quantity of food over nutritional quality and, as such, gradually grew to be seen by some within the broader HRO sector with concern (Powers, Snow, and Babb 2017). What is the role of HROs, many began to ask, in contributing to the public health crisis of chronic diet-related disease? Throughout the 1990s, some HROs began to look for and innovate ways to increase the amount of healthy, low-processed and whole foods they could make available to their clients. Some HROs slowly increased the percentage of healthy foods they were acquiring and distributing by purchasing directly from farmers, building networks with gleaners, supporting clients to grow their own food, providing nutrition and culinary education programs, working with local health care providers to provide veggie prescriptions, and focusing on foods that were culturally more familiar to immigrant and refugee client populations.

As [WhyHunger](#) has documented, more and more Food Banks want to redistribute nutritious food, fresh produce, and higher quality food to their clients. But the challenges HROs face in procuring healthy and fresh food are not so easily overcome, even in non-COVID times. As food supply chains were crippled during the pandemic and even more non-perishable foods were donated, the logistical challenges of acquiring, handling, storing and distributing fresh whole foods properly – already an under-resourced aspect of the emergency food system – was heightened. Many HROs, especially Frontline Organizations, reported through this survey that they did not have adequate storage capacity, including refrigeration, or vehicles to distribute the food quickly. And they did not have the resources to pivot their operations quickly enough to handle a larger-than-normal influx of perishable food items.

Insufficient coordinated government response to pandemic-related food insecurity cited as problematic

Forty-five percent of Advocacy Organizations and about a third of Food Banks and Frontline Organizations indicated insufficient or delayed government response as a barrier encountered during the pandemic. Similarly, they also perceived a lack of coordinated response from the government as problematic (Figure 17). In the open-ended questions, the respondents elaborated on some of these issues.

Through a program called the Farmers to Families Food Box Program (Food Box Program), USDA purchased food products from U.S.-based producers and donated them to Food Banks and other charitable organizations for distribution to households in need (USDA AMS 2021). Several written responses to the survey specifically addressed the ways in which this program missed the mark.

Farmers to Families box program highlighted that government does not truly understand the food banking system; raw product from farmers/suppliers would have been preferred over costly pre-boxed.

— Food Bank Member

Lack of client choice in Farmers to Families Food Bank program.

— Advocacy Organization Member

Work with organizations providing on the ground services before creating programs designed to help - they aren't being designed well and therefore are not always helpful. Support more coordination and collaboration to eliminate duplication of services and the start of new services when existing programs already fill the need but just need the support to keep going.

— Food Bank Member

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, USDA launched two new programs in 2020. First, in March 2020 as part of the [Families First Coronavirus Response Act](#), the Federal Government approved Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) (USDA NFS 2020). Successive extensions, appropriations and

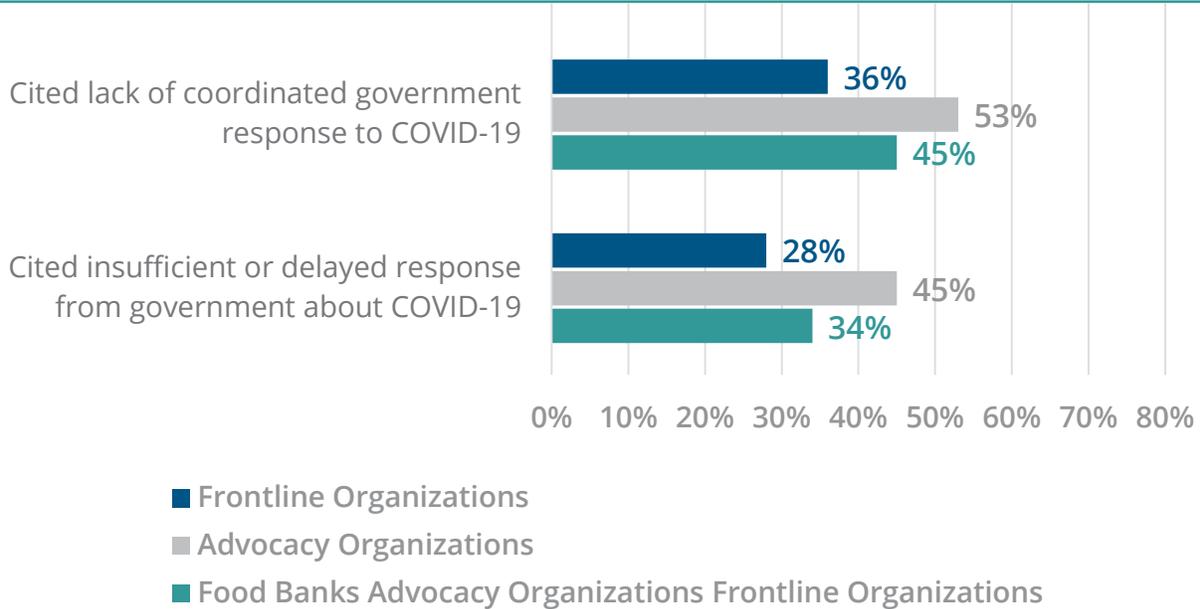
authorizations continued P-EBT into 2021 and allowed states to administer P-EBT. P-EBT reimbursed qualifying households for the value of school meals forgone due to COVID-19 related disruptions to in-person learning at school.

In April 2020, the USDA announced the [Farmers to Families Food Box Program](#) (Food Box Program) (USDA AMS 2020). As of May 31, 2021 when the program ended, USDA contractors delivered 173,699,775 boxes of fresh produce, milk, dairy and cooked meats to low-income U.S. inhabitants (USDA AMS 2021).

During the Trump Administration, the Farmers to Families Food Box Program was rolled out as a part of the Coronavirus Food Assistance Program (CFAP) under the CARES Act. Through this program, the USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) contracted with farms, farmer associations, and distributors to purchase and distribute food — fresh produce, dairy, and meat — to nonprofit organizations, such as Food Banks.

The Farmers to Families Food Box Program was a program designed to solve two co-existing crises: a spike in food insecurity due to COVID-19 and supply chain disruption issues. The \$3 billion program was heavily criticized in the beginning for [awarding contracts to companies that had no track record in procuring food from farmers](#) or distributing food to those in need (Reiley 2020). An evaluation conducted by the Food Law and Policy Clinic and the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition (NSAC) praised the intentions of the unique program but pointed out ways in which the program did not equitably reach the intended beneficiaries -- small to mid-sized farmers, and especially BIPOC- and women-owned farms. In addition, the evaluation found that food distribution to families in need was undignified in many cases and also inequitable across the nation for many food insecure populations (FLPC and NSAC 2021).

Figure 17. HROs relied on state public health departments for information, but cited overall government response to pandemic-related food insecurity as uncoordinated, insufficient, and too slow.



Source: survey questions ["Q.2.2"](#), ["Q.2.3"](#), and ["Q.2.4"](#)



HRO RESPONDENTS IDENTIFIED OPPORTUNITIES TO IMPROVE THE EMERGENCY FOOD SYSTEM AND TRANSFORM NATION'S FOOD SYSTEM

Weaknesses of emergency food system and overall food system

KEY FINDINGS

79% of HROs identified dependence on volunteer staff and donations and “just in time” food supply (69%) as weaknesses.

72% of HROs identified unpredictable food supply chains and increased reliance on shelf stable items as opposed to fresh foods (46%) as weaknesses in responding to emergencies.

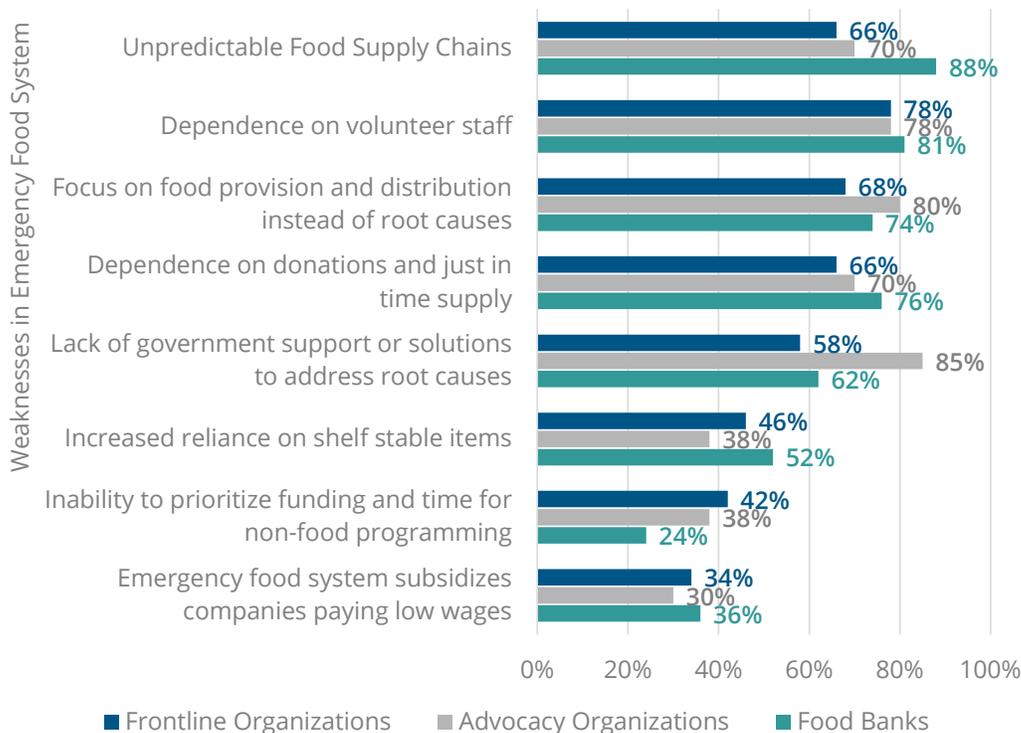
65% of HROs cite lack of government support and solutions to address the root causes of hunger as problematic.

More than 75% of HROs see inequitable access to healthy, fresh food as a food system weakness and more than 59% see an overabundance of processed foods as a problem.

More than 62% of HROs see the cost of food as a significant problem, as well as the precarity of food supply chains (more than 66%).

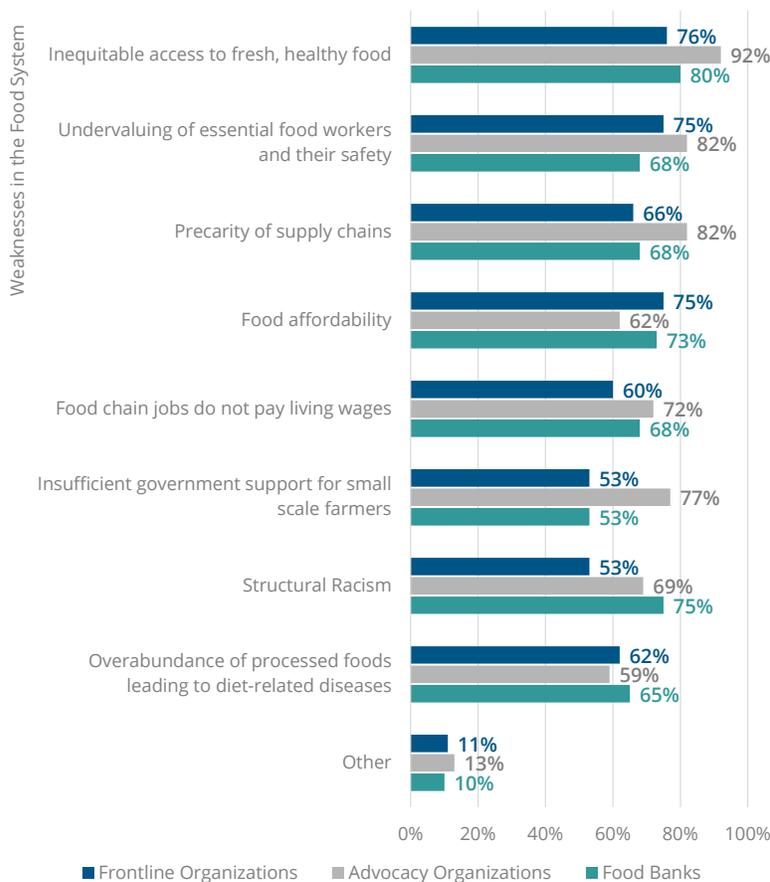
The survey asked HROs to identify weaknesses in the emergency food system ([“Q.2.3”](#)), additional support they need ([“Q.2.8”](#)), weaknesses in the overall food system ([“Q.3.1”](#)), desired changes they would like to see at the national/local policy level for better resiliency in the future, and the changes they plan to take on within their own organizations ([“Q.3.4”](#) & [“Q.3.5”](#)). The themes that emerged about the opportunities to improve the emergency food system and transform the overall food system are highlighted in this section. HROs largely identified factors that are outside their control as significant drawbacks to the current functioning of the emergency food system (Figure 18), such as precarity of supply chains, which mirrored problems identified with the overall food system (Figure 19).

Figure 18. Precarity of volunteers, focus on food supply and distribution, and lack of focus on root causes of food insecurity seen as primary weaknesses of the emergency food system.



Source: Survey question "Q.2.3"

Figure 19. HROs see inequitable food access, value of essential food workers and food supply chain precarity as key weaknesses in the overall food system



Source: Survey question "Q.3.1"

HROs see need for changes in infrastructure, practice, and policy to improve emergency food system effectiveness

KEY FINDINGS

HROs call for increased, sustainable and more flexible funding.

HROs see need for logistical, structural and technological support.

HROs lack support for their programmatic needs such as media, outreach, and volunteer support.

HROs identified different ways that agencies, policymakers, and networks could provide better support for their organizations' operations and missions (Q.2.8). Despite the success of increased funding during the pandemic across all HROs, 37% of the respondents indicated a need for a call for more funding, with an additional 16% identifying the need for specific logistical and/or infrastructure changes. More coordination support was second with affirmative responses from 27% of the organizations. When asked about what changes to policies, practices, or programs HROs planned to make to address issues in the overall food system, 32% mentioned

improvements for the emergency food system, which was the highest number of responses for this question ("[Q.3.4](#)") In addition, 22% of the respondents brought up the need for policy support to improve the emergency food system on the question about how to achieve a more resilient food system ("[Q.3.5](#)")

Various types of infrastructure, practice, and policy changes to improve the emergency food system are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. There are multiple ways HROs propose improving the current emergency food system.

THEME	EXAMPLES	NOTABLE QUOTES FROM SURVEY RESPONDENTS
<p>HRO suggested ways policymakers, philanthropy, and other agencies can help improve the Emergency Food System</p>		
<p>FUNDING</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased funding • Unrestricted funding • Low barrier applications • Less reporting • Crowdfunding • Sustainable funding • General operating expenses • More funding to purchase food • Flexible timelines 	<p><i>“Create and maintain funding streams that encourage collaboration among organizations rather than forcing them to compete in a zero-sum game.”</i> — Advocacy Organization Member</p> <p><i>“Funding data collection and data coordination across agencies (tracking customers to better give customers choice and less onerous reporting).”</i> — Frontline Organization Respondent</p>
<p>LOGISTICAL, STRUCTURAL AND TECHNOLOGICAL SUPPORT</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Warehouses • Freezers • Forklifts • Cold storage • Data support • Technology platforms • Transportation 	<p><i>“Dollars for infrastructure (freezers, coolers, vehicles, pallet jacks, etc.) Dollars for staff to adjust and provide services due to the instability of our aging volunteers.”</i> — Frontline Organization Respondent</p> <p><i>“Finance infrastructure needs like transportation, refrigeration, and dry storage.”</i> — Advocacy Organization Member</p> <p><i>“Greater use of technology platforms to ensure resources are getting to people in the most efficient and dignified way.”</i> — Frontline Organization Respondent</p> <p><i>“Develop programs to reach the most in-need such as those without transportation to pick up food at schools, Food Banks or locations they can’t reach. Develop a delivery process that reaches the unreachable.”</i> — Frontline Organization Respondent</p>
<p>PROGRAMMATIC SUPPORT</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Media support/ storytelling • Assistance in marketing • Assistance with volunteers • Capacity building resources 	<p><i>“To provide as much support for platforms distributing access to information about food resources as the energy expended on food supply chain links.”</i> — Advocacy Organization Member</p>
<p>POLICY SUPPORT</p>	<p>Less restrictions on food waste pick-up</p>	<p><i>“Currently the policies that Feeding America has in place with Corporate Grocery chains impede other local agencies from picking up excess food from local stores.”</i> — Food Bank Respondent</p>

THEME	EXAMPLES	NOTABLE QUOTES FROM SURVEY RESPONDENTS
Planned improvements within the HROs own policies and practices		
FOOD DISTRIBUTION CHANGES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continued drive-through service Continued delivery service Expanded area of service Volunteer recruitment Increased freezer space 	<p><i>"No geographical boundaries to access our services."</i> — Frontline Organization Respondent</p> <p><i>"We are a community based food pantry that depends on donations from individuals. We started an outreach program to find more volunteers in different capacities."</i> — Frontline Organization Respondent</p> <p><i>"Our focus is on making food distribution as dignified and healthy as possible for as many New Yorkers as we can reach."</i> — Frontline Organization Respondent</p>
ENSURING EQUITY AMONGST CLIENTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offering culturally-appropriate foods Focus on anti-racism 	<p><i>"We're working to build partnerships with organizations that have functional trust with communities of immigrants and refugees to improve awareness, referral, and access among these groups - currently through our existing partner agency network, but hopefully eventually through these trusted organizations."</i> — Food Bank Member</p> <p><i>"Develop partnerships and marketing strategies to reach individuals in areas of high rates of food apartheid and making programming more accessible to people of color."</i> — Frontline Organization Respondent</p>
CLIENT COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community involvement in decision-making Community empowerment 	<p><i>"More inclusion of people of color and program participants in planning and evaluation."</i> — Advocacy Organization Member</p> <p><i>"Greater investment in youth-led organizing efforts and community change initiatives. More emphasis on community-ownership within our projects."</i> — Advocacy Organization Member</p>
POLICY AND ADVOCACY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fewer restrictions on food waste pick-up 	<p><i>"We will continue to call attention to the policies and exclusivity clauses that Feeding America and other large nonprofits have in their contracts with corporate donors since they inhibit the ability of smaller local organizations to pick up food that is going to waste."</i> — Independent Food Bank Member</p>

Source: survey questions "Q.2.8", "Q.3.4", and "Q.3.5"

All types of HROs desire and seek support for better coordination within their sector; Frontline Organizations could benefit from a national network

One in four survey respondents brought up the need for better coordination within their sector in order for each organization and the emergency food system overall to work more effectively (“Q.2.8”). One respondent noted: “Support more coordination and collaboration to eliminate duplication of services and the start of new services when existing programs already fill the need but just need the support to keep going.” Other peer support ideas mentioned were as follows:

- advice via zoom or google groups
- monthly support circles to share ideas
- assistance in identifying additional gaps in the community that could be addressed with current or new programming
- help sharing successful new program models with national stakeholders
- getting the word out on how the emergency food system works – clarifying the roles of Food Banks and direct service providers
- create better regional systems for communication, coordination, allocation of work that needs to be done.

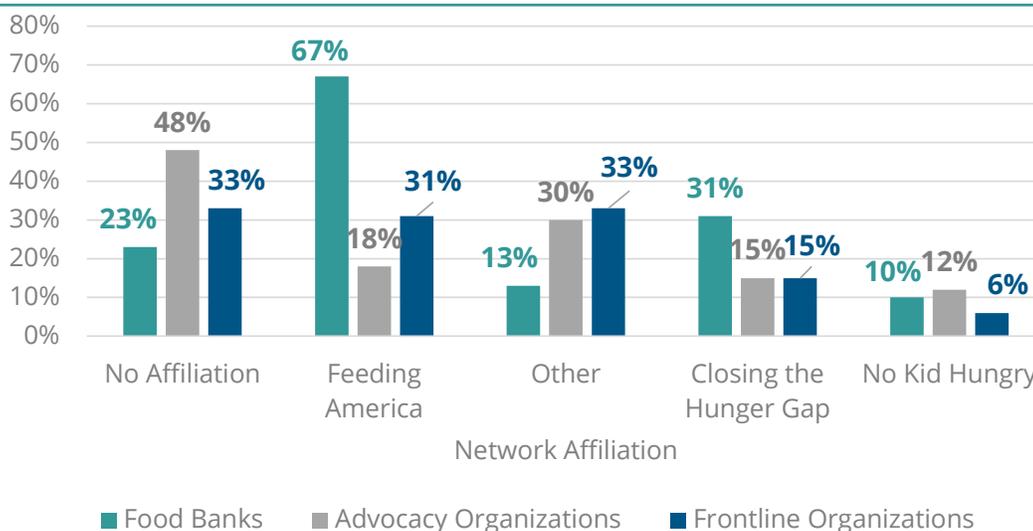
- facilitation between local organizations and statewide organizations.
- assistance with local level surveillance and data collection related to hunger to inform agency decisions/programs

One of the main ways the desired coordination, collaboration, and information sharing can be achieved is through networks. We asked HROs which networks they are part of and it turned out almost half of Advocacy Organizations, one third of Frontline Organizations and about one in four Food Banks selected no affiliations (Figure 20). As expected, over 65% of Food Banks were part of the Feeding America Network. Meanwhile, around 30% of Advocacy Organizations and Frontline Organizations were part of various smaller, mostly local networks (“Q.5.4”). A comment brought up by one of the HRO respondents highlights the need and proposes a solution:

This question reveals an opportunity - there is not a nationwide network of direct service providers. I used to work in aging, and we were connected with [Meals on Wheel Association of America] MOWAA and [National Association of Nutrition and Aging Services Programs] NANASP. Feeding America is focused on Food Banks.

— Frontline Organization Respondent

Figure 20. Considerable number of HROs that responded to this survey are not a part of any networks, though a larger portion of Food Banks responded they were a part of the Feeding America network



Source: survey question “Q.5.4”

HROs call for a stronger social safety net as key to addressing food insecurity

KEY FINDINGS

HROs advocate for local, statewide or federal officials to increase funding for Pandemic-EBT, TEFAP, unemployment, and universal free school meals.

HROs advocate for increased support for programs that intersect with issues of food security such as mental health, childcare and virtual school programs.

HROs advocate for SNAP changes such as more flexibility, broader access, fewer eligibility requirements, and a simpler application.

Throughout the responses to many open-ended questions, HROs advocated for local, statewide or federal officials to do more in order to strengthen the social safety net. Compiled responses to those questions are summarized in Table 4 ([“Q.2.8”](#), [“Q.3.4”](#), and [“Q.3.5”](#)), with a special focus on the SNAP program.

Table 4. There are multiple ways HROs propose improving the social safety net in the US.

SOCIAL SAFETY NET	NOTABLE QUOTES FROM SURVEY RESPONDENTS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase funding for <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pandemic-EBT • TEFAP • Unemployment benefits • Universal free meals in schools • Extend CFAP Program • Provide flexibilities to the existing programs • Lower eligibility requirements for the existing programs • Increased availability of support services <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mental health • Childcare options • Virtual school 	<p><i>“There should be a nimble way to get income support to all people who need it during a crisis and that support should be sustained throughout the duration of the crisis.”</i> — Frontline Organization Respondent</p> <p><i>“Enhance the Federal tools that promote food security and still emphasize local spending (SNAP, Fresh Bucks, universal income, expanded unemployment).”</i> — Frontline Organization Respondent</p> <p><i>“ People need living incomes, ones that make it possible to provide both food and shelter. During times of crisis, people need additional income support. Emergency food networks should not be used to prop up an inadequate system of income support. Public benefits like TANF and disability programs are woefully under-funded and leave their participants with no options during a crisis. There also needs to be a way to assist people who are ineligible for programs due to their immigration status or other statuses which disqualify them for assistance.”</i> — Frontline Organization Respondent</p>

SOCIAL SAFETY NET	NOTABLE QUOTES FROM SURVEY RESPONDENTS
Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase SNAP funding • Better flexibility • Broader access to SNAP benefits • Less eligibility requirements <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SNAP interview waiver • Remove barriers from online applications 	<p><i>“SNAP benefits are shown to be most effective at reducing food insecurity, an increase in benefit amounts and eligibility is necessary.”</i> — Advocacy Organization Member</p> <p><i>“...distributing funds equitably to the people versus big businesses. avenues for small businesses, agencies, farmers markets, etc. for online ordering/payment with SNAP/EBT and WIC - the software is only affordable to Wal-Mart and Amazon because the fees are ridiculously unequal.”</i> — Frontline Organization Respondent</p>

Source: survey questions [“Q.2.8”](#), [“Q.3.4”](#), and [“Q.3.5”](#)

SITUATIONAL CONTEXT

The contribution of Food Banks, food pantries, soup kitchens and other hunger relief organizations makes up a relatively small percentage of the overall charitable response to hunger in the United States. SNAP, under the auspices of the USDA, [delivers roughly nine times more food to people than the 200 Food Banks](#) who make up the entire Feeding America network (Feeding America 2019a). The importance of the federal nutrition programs to support families who are facing food hardship is critical, and many HROs are cognizant of the private charitable food system's limitations in ending food insecurity. Feeding America is a strong advocate for strengthening SNAP as a primary means of supporting hungry families and encourages its network of 200 Food Banks to advocate on the state-level: *"SNAP is the first line of defense against hunger in our communities. SNAP benefits give families more dignity when meeting their food needs and help shorten the lines of families waiting for food assistance at Food Banks."* (Feeding America n.d.). And, according to Food Bank News: *"SNAP outreach emerged as the most common [advocacy activity] by far, available at 73 of the largest 100 Food Banks."* (Food Bank News 2021)"

And, yet, SNAP which is designed "to provide nutrition benefits to supplement the food budget of needy families so they can purchase healthy food and move towards self-sufficiency" in no way eradicates the underlying reasons for food insecurity: persistent poverty due to insufficient income (i.e., a federal minimum wage that has not kept pace with inflation). The [United States Census Bureau reported](#) that during the pandemic more than three-quarters of families relying on nutritional assistance (i.e. SNAP) had at least one person working and about one-third included two or more workers. Employment in the U.S. does not guarantee self-sufficiency (US Census Bureau 2020). Chronically low wages means workers cannot cover the basic costs of living. Food is one of a handful of non-fixed expenses that families can – and often do – reduce compared to other items such as medication, childcare or housing.

The United States' social safety net -- comprising a variety of programs designed to protect low-income people from poverty and hardship -- includes programs such as Social Security,

Unemployment Insurance, Medicare and SNAP. However, some argue the programs are troubled with inadequacies and inequities, particularly with regards to race (Gaines, Hardy, and Schweitzer 2021; SSN 2015). A recent analysis from the Center for American Progress revealed state-level differences in how benefits are distributed. In particular, the analysis showed that "U.S. regions with larger populations of color have weaker safety nets and anti-poverty policies, and that regions with weaker safety nets have higher rates of hardship and worse economic outcomes overall." (Gaines, Hardy, and Schweitzer 2021). The average level of benefits in the six programs that provide cash or near-cash assistance varies substantially across programs and states. None of these programs provide adequate benefits because levels of assistance are set substantially below the poverty line. And, while the social safety net has successfully enabled low-income families to survive, it has on the whole been insufficient in helping families escape poverty altogether. As Political journalist Adam Millsap wrote in an article published by Forbes in 2021: *"The goal of a safety net should be to reduce the number of people who need it at any given time, not out of callousness, but because a life spent receiving public assistance is not the life most people want. Whether as an employee or employer, a lifetime of creating value for others and participating in a society based on mutual benefit and voluntary exchange is more fulfilling than a lifetime spent getting by on public aid."* (Millsap 2021).

The USDA implemented numerous policy changes that expanded the scope and coverage of existing programs such as SNAP and child nutrition programs in response to the pandemic. Together, these initiatives contributed to an increase in total expenditures on food and nutrition assistance programs, which amounted to a new historical inflation-adjusted high of \$122.1 billion, 32% greater than the previous year with SNAP accounting for 65% of that total (Toossi, Jones, and Hodges 2021).

Still, the pandemic was particularly instructive about the insufficiency of the U.S. social safety in normal times but especially during times of unanticipated catastrophes that affected people in all regions of the U.S. – not just the chronically

poor and food insecure. Some of the weaknesses revealed that resulted in additional strain to HROs as they filled in the gaps included: delays and administrative strains in unemployment insurance, the slow pace of adjustments to the amount of SNAP dollars available, and certain states did not expand Medicaid. The general conclusion is that, in order to be better prepared for future unexpected emergencies that lead to sudden economic crises, the U.S. government should enact policies that would automatically increase the levels of aid provided through the social safety net at the onset of such an emergency situation (PGPF 2021; Thomson-DeVeaux 2020; Aaron 2020).



HROs perceive precarity of food supply chains, food accessibility and affordability as major issues, with local food systems emerging as a solution

KEY FINDINGS

HROs call for nation-wide policy changes to support small-scale agriculture and local food systems as an emerging solution to the precarity of existing food supply chains.

HROs plan to make programmatic changes to support local and small-scale food systems.

There were multiple issues selected by the majority of HROs pointing to the fact that the current food system struggles to provide healthy and affordable food to consumers in a predictable manner. The number one food system weakness selected by the HROs was inequitable access to fresh, healthy food. Over 60% of HROs also perceived overabundance of processed foods leading to diet-related diseases to be a weakness. Food affordability was another issue perceived as a weakness in the food system by 62-75% of HROs. (Figure 19) When asked about the desired policy and practice changes ([“Q.3.5”](#)), several HROs commented on ways to overcome these issues: *“City and state to make choice of healthy food core to grants and support up and down supply chain”*; *“Increase access to healthy food (for ALL, which may include free or reduced prices) at retail level (grocery stores, bodegas, farmers markets) and not force people to go to multiple locations in order to feed their families”*; and *“Make healthy food available and less expensive”*.

Several HROs are planning to make changes within their capacity to do more advocacy efforts to increase equitable access to healthy foods ([“Q.3.4”](#)). Some of these efforts include working on sugar-sweetened beverage ban, launching a policy and advocacy platform for retail food access, working with the city and state governments to allocate funds for healthy options up and down the supply chain, and more double-value programs to incentivize healthy food selection among SNAP/WIC/TANF shoppers.

Precarity of supply chains was the second major perceived weakness of the food systems. Between 62 to 82% of the HROs selected this as one of the weaknesses in the food system that the COVID-19 pandemic revealed (Figure 19) in addition to 66 to 88% of the HROs being affected by the unpredictable supply chain issues during the pandemic (Figure 18).

HROs consider support for local food systems and small-scale agriculture as essential

Insufficient government support for small-scale farmers was selected as a weakness of the food system by 77% of the Food Banks and 53% of Frontline Organizations and Advocacy Organizations (Figure 19). In addition, support for the local food system was voiced by many HROs in the open-ended questions. The desired shift toward local and small-scale systems was brought up both in the call for policy change at a higher level as well as practice changes at the HRO level.

Table 5. HROs desire for national policy support towards local food systems and small-scale agriculture as well as take active role in supporting them

THEME	NOTABLE QUOTES FROM SURVEY RESPONDENTS
<p>NATION-WIDE POLICY CHANGES TOWARDS SUPPORTING SMALL-SCALE AGRICULTURE</p>	<p><i>“Policies that support large/mega agribusiness to the exclusion of small/family farmers need to be changed. Access to markets for all agri-business needs to be developed scaled to reasonable expectations.”</i> — Advocacy Organization Member</p> <p><i>“Local, small-scale farmers are essential, and we need to shift towards regenerative farming methods to strengthen our food system, instead of big monocrops that are killing the planet and the people that live here.”</i> — Frontline Organization Respondent</p> <p><i>“Farm policy that supports small-scale, local, and urban farming operations and education through funding and training resources.”</i> — Frontline Organization Respondent</p> <p><i>“Update and enforce antitrust laws. Shift subsidies to supporting smaller farmers who are growing and supplying healthy food direct to their communities.”</i> — Advocacy Organization Member</p> <p><i>“U.S. Farmers should not have to compete with foreign countries to keep their prices low, establish more safety standards for corporate owned meat processing plants, have smaller producer meat processing plants, support legislation for cooperative businesses, increase access for small minority owned producers.”</i> — Advocacy Organization Member</p>
<p>HRO-LEVEL SUPPORT FOR SMALL-SCALE AGRICULTURE</p>	<p><i>“Immediate financial assistance for small farmers to pivot their businesses/sales platforms.”</i> — Frontline Organization Respondent</p> <p><i>“Focus on farm-to-pantry programming.”</i> — Advocacy Organization Member</p> <p><i>“Working more directly with smaller local farmers”</i> — Frontline Organization Respondent</p> <p><i>“NWTN Essential Gardens - we distributed free seeds and plants in May to encourage folks to grow food - over 300 families participated.”</i> — Advocacy Organization Member</p>

THEME	NOTABLE QUOTES FROM SURVEY RESPONDENTS
<p>NATION-WIDE POLICY AND PRACTICE CHANGES TO SHIFT TOWARDS LOCAL FOOD SYSTEMS</p>	<p><i>“Prevent land loss for black farmers, address heirs property legislation to prevent land loss, and recognize cooperatives as businesses in need of federal support dollars.”</i> — Advocacy Organization Member</p> <p><i>“...establishing more relationships between local purchasers and local food producers, creating food contingency plans that include vulnerability analyses, more community gardens for immediate local food access...”</i> — Frontline Organization Respondent</p> <p><i>“Funding for land restoration on vacant city lots so that the space can be utilized for local urban farming. Small scale specialty crop growers should receive additional funding. Black, indigenous, people of color should receive land reparations for food production.”</i> — Frontline Organization Respondent</p> <p><i>“Review of policies that might be a hindrance to small and midsize meat processors. More federal dollars for urban farmers and the start-up of indoor food production. The development of regional food systems to lessen the reliance on national and international food producers.”</i> — Advocacy Organization Member</p>
<p>HRO-LEVEL SHIFT TOWARDS SUPPORTING LOCAL FOOD SYSTEMS</p>	<p><i>“We will explore advocacy to find further funding for emergency food response by local food system.”</i> — Frontline Organization Respondent</p> <p><i>“Stringer [Manhattan Borough president] calls for development of local food systems.”</i> — Food Bank Member</p>

Many HROs recognize the detrimental effect of structural racism and plan to address racial inequities in various ways

KEY FINDINGS

75% of Food Banks, 69% of Advocacy Organizations, and 53% of Frontline Organizations recognize structural racism as a weakness of the food system.

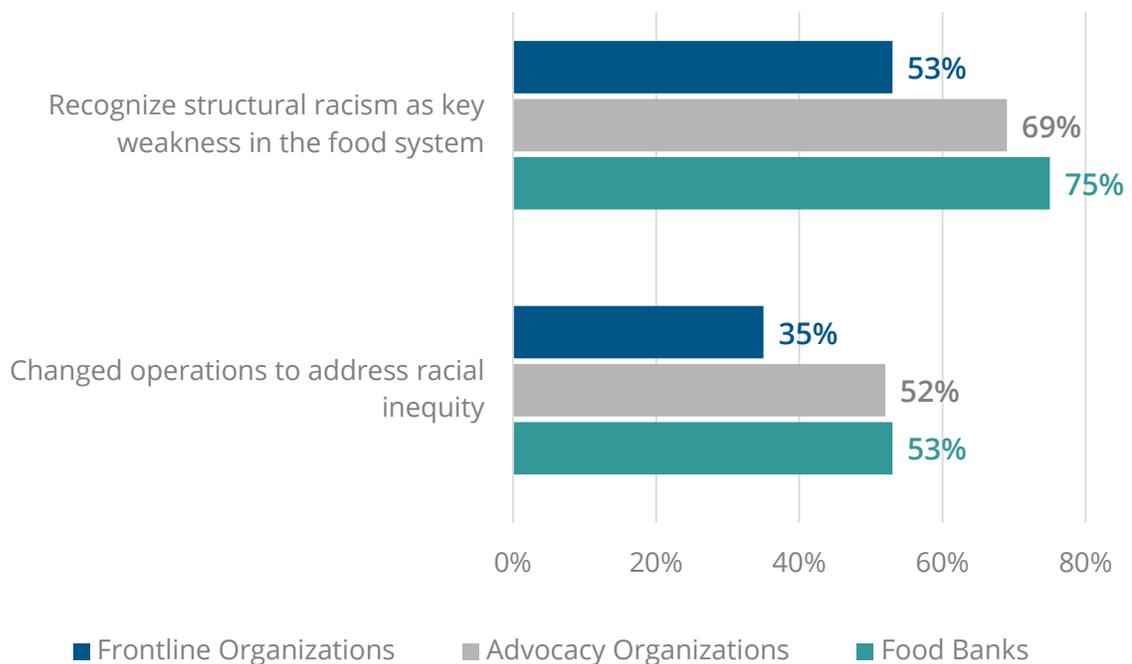
HROs intend to address racial inequities by providing equitable food access to their clients, making internal policy and programmatic changes through a racial equity lens, and advocating for broader policy changes to rectify racial inequities in society.

More than half of each type of HRO perceives structural racism as a weakness of the food system. Among those who do, around 70% shifted to address racial inequities in the food system. Figure 21 shows the breakdown for each type of organization. ([“Q.3.1”](#) and [“Q.3.6”](#))

There were different levels of understanding and intentions about what ‘addressing racial inequities’

entails for different organizations. These levels ranged from improving access to food provisions by people of color, to seeking input from communities of color, to doing internal trainings, to committing to internal culture change, to doing external advocacy work in solidarity with BIPOC communities.

Figure 21. HROs perceive structural racism as a problem, and shifted operations in response.



Source: survey questions [“Q.3.1”](#) and [“Q.3.6”](#)

Table 6. Selected HRO survey responses show racial equity work focused on clients, internal organizational operations, and diversifying food suppliers

<p>SELECTED QUOTES REPRESENTING HRO'S INTENTIONS TO IMPROVE EQUITABLE FOOD ACCESS</p>	<p>SELECTED QUOTES REPRESENTING HRO'S INTERNAL ORGANIZATIONAL SHIFTS RELATED TO FOOD EQUITY</p>	<p>SELECTED QUOTES REPRESENTING HRO'S EXTERNALLY-FOCUSED FOOD EQUITY ORGANIZATIONAL SHIFTS</p>
<p><i>"We were already working to reach out to immigrant families who had stopped accessing food pantries for fear of being deported."</i> — Advocacy Organization Member</p> <p><i>"We are partnering with a BIPOC-led organization to re-direct thousands of pounds of food each month to low-income BIPOC communities."</i> — Frontline Organization Respondent</p> <p><i>"Provide cultural foods."</i> — Frontline Organization Respondent</p>	<p><i>"We have built a DEI [diversity, equity, and inclusion] committee that is being built with members of all facets of our community (staff, customers, board, community partners); this is the leading charge of year-long first steps."</i> — Frontline Organization Respondent</p> <p><i>"Created a job to provide equity, diversity, and inclusion."</i> — Food Bank Member</p>	<p><i>"Well, we work on both lack of access and farm worker justice issues. The need for assisting farm workers has increased."</i> — Advocacy Organization Member</p> <p><i>"This work is ongoing, but we are buying food from BIPOC farmers and processors."</i> — Frontline Organization Respondent</p>

Situational Context

The persistence of racial disparities in poverty in the U.S. (2 to 3 times higher for Black and Latino people than whites over the past three decades) has been well documented since the first official poverty measure was developed and implemented in the mid 1960s (Haider and Roque 2021; Odoms-Young 2018). Racial disparities in food insecurity have unsurprisingly followed the same pattern. Given the causal relationship between poverty and hunger, it follows that HROs concerned with the root causes of hunger would seek to understand and address racial disparities in their work (Action Against Hunger 2014; Wight et al. 2014; The Healthcare Value Hub 2020) .

Households' experience with food insecurity during the pandemic continues to underscore the tenacity of racial inequities. A recent analysis by Northwestern University's Institute for Policy Research of data gathered by the Census Bureau tracking food insecurity in real time during the pandemic in 2020 found that around 29% of Black households with children and 24% of Latino households, compared to 14% of white households, reported not having enough to eat "sometimes or often" over the course of the pandemic in 2020. And even as the pandemic began to slow its spread in late 2020 and the food insecurity rate began to fall back to pre-pandemic levels, the rates for Black households fell more slowly (Schanzenbach and Pitts 2020; US Census Bureau 2021a).

In their 2020 report, the Center for Disaster Philanthropy found that only five percent of funding by foundations and public charities to specified recipients was explicitly directed for persons and communities of color, which have been hit hard by the virus (CDP 2020). The gaps in addressing structural racism show up in many facets of the sectors seeking to address social problems.

Since we conducted this survey, several new developments demonstrate movement towards a sharpening of the lens on race in the food system in 2021. For instance, after agencies reported that program participants do not want to have their race or ethnicity identified for them, the USDA is ending the practice of visual observation as a means of obtaining data on the race and ethnicity of participants in the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) and the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) (USDA NFS 2021). In addition, the USDA published a Federal Register Notice requesting public input on its efforts to advance racial justice and equity across the Department, citing the need to "create opportunities for the improvement of communities that have been historically underserved." (USDA 2021c).

Among HROs themselves, a recent report from Food Bank News describes how racial equity is emerging as a desired outcome in food distribution practices (Food Bank News 2021). Second Harvest of Heartland in Minnesota is investing more than \$13 million in addressing racial inequity in food distribution. Some of those funds will be invested directly into communities of color. The Good Shepherd Food Bank of Maine has started a regranting program to community organizations run by people of color. And the Greater Chicago Food Depository has committed significant funds to expand food access into Black and Latino communities.

The need to address root causes of hunger highlighted by many HROs

KEY FINDINGS

Around 65% of HROs cite lack of government support and solutions to address the root causes of hunger as problematic.

More than 60% of HROs identify low wage jobs in the food sector, and lack of valuing essential food system workers as significant problems.

7 to 19% of HROs plan to spend more time on fair wage advocacy campaigns compared to their pre-pandemic allocated time.

HROs call for better working conditions and benefits for all workers along the food chain.

60 to 90% of HROs plan to continue or increase their advocacy efforts after the pandemic.

Focus on food provision and distribution instead of root causes was perceived by 68 - 80% of organizations as a weakness revealed by the pandemic. Lack of government support or solutions to address root causes was also perceived as a weakness by 85% of Advocacy Organizations and for about half of the Food Banks and Frontline Organizations (“Q.2.3”). In addition, jobs across the food supply chain not paying living wages was perceived as a weakness of the food system by 60 to 72% of organizations and undervaluing of essential food workers and safety was selected by 68 to 82% of the organizations.

The root causes of food insecurity are broadly understood to be persistent poverty (heavily influenced by systemic social inequities, such as racial and gender injustice), unemployment and underemployment, and the cost of healthcare and housing (Driver n.d.). In the U.S. low-wage jobs, wage theft, underemployment, and/or jobs without benefits are key drivers. A desire for policy changes that would address root causes of hunger, as well as strategies HROs could employ themselves, emerged as themes across the responses to multiple questions. When we asked the respondents what additional support would be beneficial for HRO’s operations and mission (“Q.2.8”), about one in five respondents expressed the need to engage in root cause work, such as working to eliminate poverty, living wages, universal income, affordable health care, rent protection, improved unemployment benefits, sick pay, and anti-racism efforts.

People need living incomes, ones that make it possible to provide both food and shelter. During times of crisis, people need additional income support. Emergency food networks should not be used to prop up an inadequate system of income support. ... There also needs to be a way to assist people who are ineligible for programs due to their immigration status or other statuses which disqualify them for assistance.

— Frontline Organization Respondent

Corporate influence, lack of accountability, reliance on individual-level solutions rather than systemic solutions, the inability of smaller organizations to have capacity to prioritize root cause work over direct service work, unrealistic community expectations and “Focus on charitable and government funding on emergency feeding only.”

— Frontline Organization Respondent

We also asked what changes should be made at the local and/or national policy level that may lead to a more resilient food system (“Q.3.5”). One in three respondents brought up several desired policy changes that we categorized as root-cause related, which was the highest number among the response categories, followed by improving direct food access programs (30%) and support for local food systems and small-scale agriculture (29%).

Listed below are repeated policy change recommendations that would create a more resilient food system in the future. At the heart of these recommendations is a recognition that hunger and food insecurity are not stand-alone issues and need to be addressed through intersectional strategies:

- Living wages/raising minimum wage
- Universal basic income
- Affordable housing
- Protections/hazard pay for low-wage essential workers
- Better benefits for essential workers, farmworkers
- Improved working conditions of essential workers
- Less emphasis on emergency food response, more on root causes of food insecurity

The local and state systems can implement many changes, especially ones that support small and medium size producers, all farm and food workers, etc. I prefer to focus on the big problem - our form of capitalism and the racism, sexism, and classism that upholds the food system as it is. If we don't actively work to change our economic system, we will only piecemeal change parts of the food system and benefit a few at a time.

— Frontline Organization Respondent

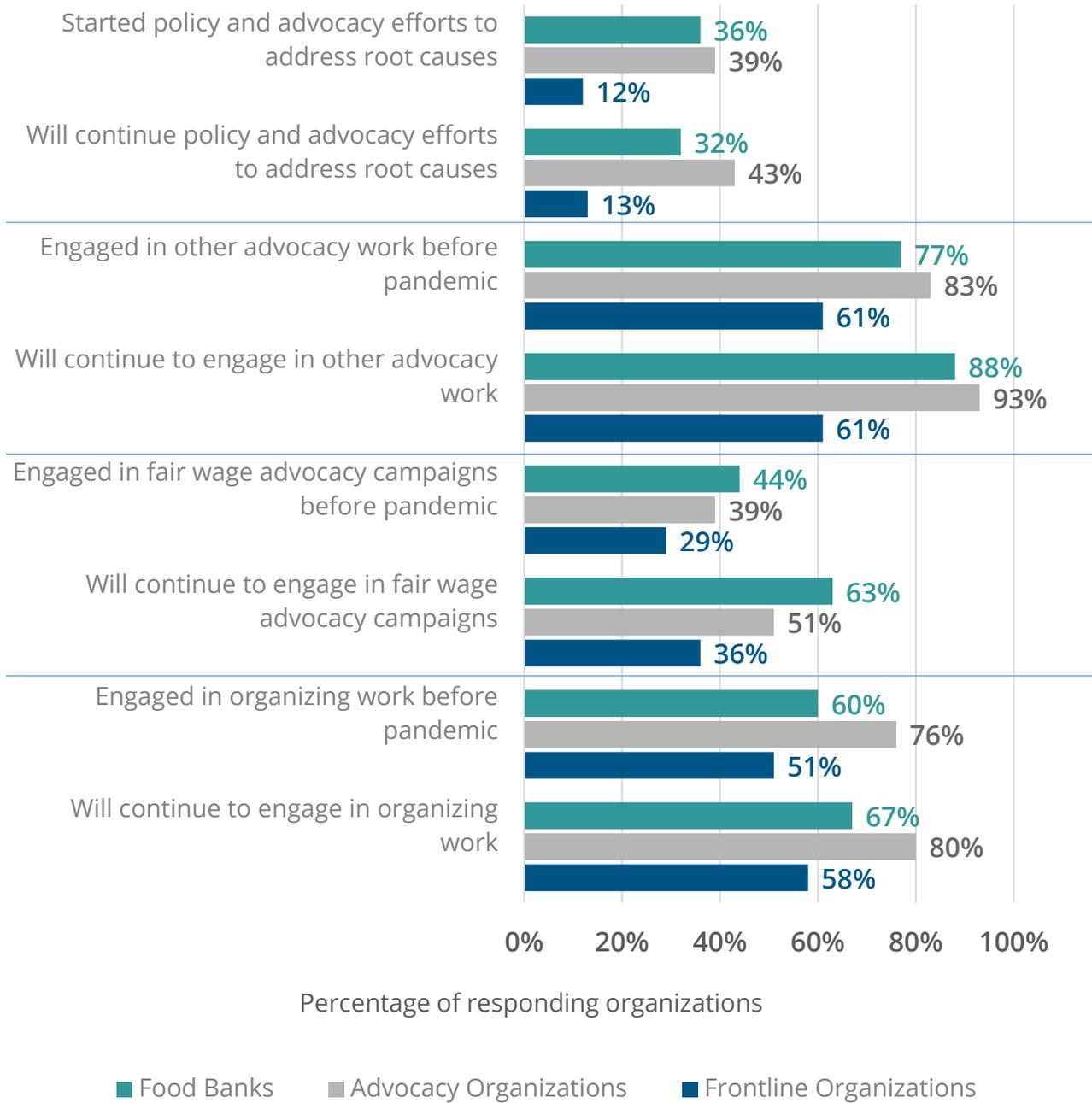
More HROs are now looking for ways to do more root cause work to combat hunger

For those working in the antihunger space, root cause work includes activities to organize and advocate for structural and policy change. Almost one-third of Food Banks indicated they started advocacy and policy efforts around root causes as a result of the pandemic. The survey probed specifically for how much time HROs spent on fair wage advocacy campaigns. Although they were not spending a lot of time pre-pandemic on these campaigns, a significant number of HRO respondents indicated their intention to focus more on these issues moving forward. (Figure 22)

When asked about the organizational level changes towards a more resilient food system, eleven organizations indicated they will be engaging in advocacy or making internal changes towards ending hunger at its root causes, such as advocating for living wages, affordable housing, and anti-poverty measures. One organization mentioned they increased their full-time staff salaries to a minimum of \$15/hour, largely considered a living wage compared to the federal minimum wage.

There is an important contradiction to take note of within the anti-hunger sector. While many HROs are beginning to name that structural racism and economic injustice are at the foundation of why their work is necessary, fewer have made the shift from strategies rooted in charity and social service to racial equity and social justice strategies. As was reinforced in this survey, HROs do not always perceive or acknowledge their role in upholding inequitable systems. When asked about the role of the emergency food system subsidizing companies' low-wages by providing food to families who must use charitable food programs to make ends meet (more than two in five, or 43% of working client households of Food Banks have at least one full-time worker, and more than half of working client households report part-time employment, or working 30 hours or less per week), only around 30% of the organizations perceived this as a weakness of the emergency food system ("[Q.2.3](#)") (Oxfam America 2014).

Figure 22. More HROs plan to engage in root cause work, advocacy campaigns, and fair wage campaigns post pandemic.



Source: survey questions "Q.1.3.", "Q.1.4", "Q.1.6", "Q.1.7"

Situational Context

In his book *Big Hunger*, the author-advocate Andy Fisher provides examples of this long standing contradiction inherent in the mission of HROs that engage donors and volunteers in the important work of mitigating the impact of food insecurity on families but not in the root cause work of eliminating food insecurity altogether (Fisher 2017). Fisher describes the various missed opportunities that HROs have had to add their voices to the chorus advocating for living wages. For instance, not one Food Bank in California endorsed SB-3, the legislation that increased the state minimum wage to \$15 per hour. He also points out that only a handful of anti-hunger groups supported the protests organized by food workers in over 160 cities from 2012 to 2015 in support of a \$15 minimum wage. And in 2013 when Washington, D.C.'s City Council passed an ordinance mandating that big-box retailers pay their employees a \$12.50 minimum wage, none of the local or national D.C.-based HROs supported the legislation. Glaringly, many of those same HROs regularly receive seven-figure grants from Walmart – the largest big-box retailer in the U.S. which has been routinely criticized for underemployment and low wages, reasons many households wind up frequenting HROs in the first place (Barrabi 2020; Rosenberg 2020).

However, this survey also demonstrated that some HROs have already dipped a toe into understanding and addressing the root causes of hunger. And many have been influenced by their experiences during the pandemic to engage more deeply in root cause work. An emerging network of HROs that came together to expand hunger relief efforts beyond food distribution towards strategies that promote ending hunger by addressing the root causes, Closing the Hunger Gap (described in greater detail in the Introduction) organizes and convenes at the flexion of this tension between feeding the line and ending the line. In 2022 CTHG will be launching a narrative change campaign called *Next Shift* (CTHG 2021). The intended audience for the first phase of this campaign is HROs. The campaign is asking HROs to engage with the question: To what extent and in what ways do HROs “normalize” food insecurity in our society and even perpetuate it. The goal of the campaign is to enlist HROs to first commit to providing thriving wages and safe working conditions for their own staff and volunteers, and center racial equity in their own organizational structures. Ultimately the goal is to enlist HROs to challenge and change the dominant and false narrative that hunger will always be with us and instead assert that nutritious food is a human right.



DO MEASURES OF “SUCCESS” NEED TO SHIFT?

KEY FINDINGS

Frontline Organizations primarily measure impact through the number of people receiving food services (83%), the pounds of food provided (66%), and the number of meals provided (46%).

Food Banks also primarily measure impact through the pounds of food provided (88%), the number of people receiving food services (73%), and the number of meals provided (69%).

Advocacy Organizations (55%), on the other hand, primarily focus on changes in government policies and practices as a measure of impact.

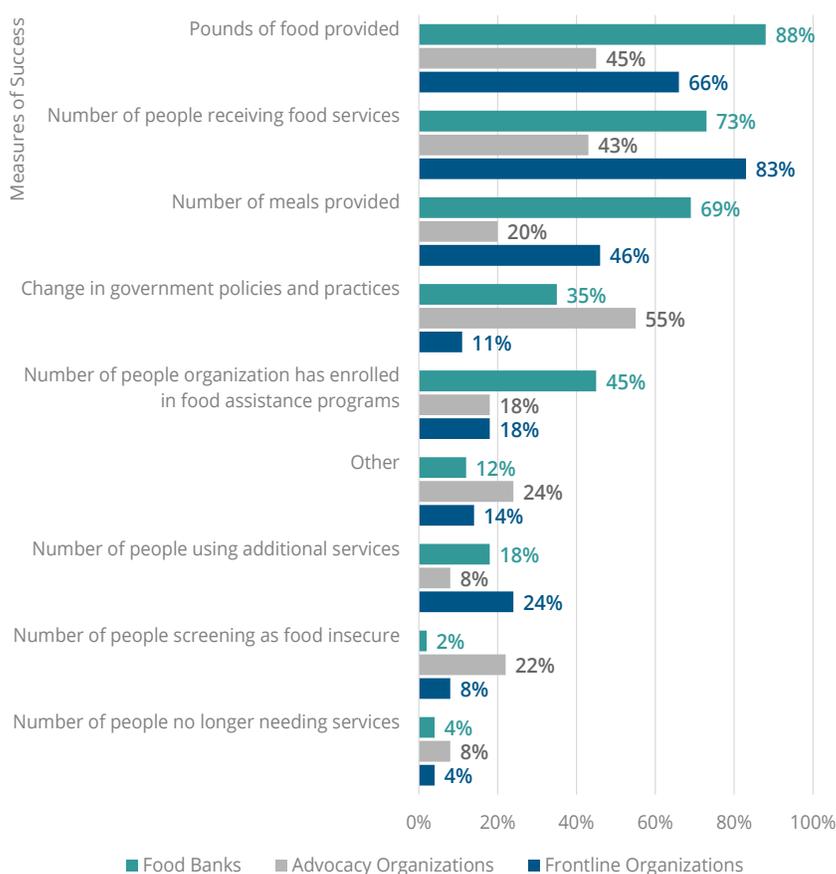
Less than 5% of all HROs responded that they measure success by the number of people no longer needing their services.

Assuming what is measured is what can be improved, this survey inquired about how HROs measure their impact. As Figure 23 displays, the majority of the Food Banks and Frontline Organizations measure their impact by either pounds of food distributed, number of meals provided, or number of people receiving services. Advocacy Organizations, as expected, are more focused on the change in government policies and practices. Only 18% of Frontline Organizations and Advocacy Organizations measured success and impact by the number of people the organization had enrolled in food assistance programs. In contrast, 45% of Food Banks highlight enrollment numbers as a measure of success.

Only 4% of Food Banks and Frontline Organizations and 8% of Advocacy Organizations measure impact as ‘number of people no longer needing services’. One respondent commented on their measurement methods as follows:

While we track pounds (13M/month) and people (600,000+/month) served, as a measure of our success, these are actually a measurement of tragedy and heartbreak.
— survey respondent Q.3.7

Figure 23. HROs measure success largely through the volume of food distributed and meals served.



Source: survey question “Q.1.1”

Situational Context

In the authors' views, the responses to this portion of the survey underscored that the predominant evaluation metric used by HROs creates a false narrative for "success" of hunger relief. The authors seek to highlight the problematic nature of this metric among HROs as well as funders who only ask for quantitative "return on investment" measures as a requirement for grant funding.

What's most problematic about these results is the normalization of valuing the volume of food getting to an increasing number of people in need, as opposed to success in helping people no longer need those services. Justifiably, the role of an HRO during an event such as the COVID-19 pandemic is indeed to provide food. However, the country's charitable food complex has steadily grown over the past 20 years. Centering quantitative annual outputs instead of long-term sustainable outcomes communicates that more and bigger is better. With an emphasis on growth, troublingly – but not surprisingly – the emergency food system with hunger relief as the primary strategy has become a long term solution to food insecurity in the U.S. (Shirvell 2019).

The sustained and growing presence of the charitable food complex in the U.S. is seen by many as a reflection of an ineffective governmental response to poverty, and an inequitable and weak social safety net. "We're celebrating success in the wrong way," argues Andy Fisher, the Portland, Oregon-based anti-hunger activist and author of *Big Hunger: The Unholy Alliance Between Corporate America and Anti-Hunger Groups*. "When success is measured by the amount of pounds you distribute and then the people you serve, it perpetuates the problem, but it's an easier, tangible thing to measure outputs instead of outcomes...This is an institutionalized charitable response to a problem of wages that don't provide enough for people to live dignified lives. Hunger is a symptom of an unjust system that exploits people and a food system that provides abundant, unhealthy, wasted food while simultaneously destroying the planet and exploiting workers."



Recommendations

Hunger Relief Organizations (HROs) were invited to elaborate on their responses in narrative form as a part of the survey. More than 1500 written responses were captured and the authors selected and highlighted some of these comments throughout the report to provide context and texture to the experiences of HROs providing food assistance during the pandemic. Based on the aggregation and analysis of the data and the written responses, the authors pulled out the following composite ideas, policies and practices that would improve the efficacy of HROs in responding to a pandemic-like disaster, as well as addressing food insecurity more generally.

Key recommendations from HRO respondents

- **Government interventions:** Fortify the social safety net so that it more robustly prevents hunger. The USDA-FNS should make SNAP, WIC, TEFAP and the National School Lunch Program more accessible to more people with fewer restrictions and less bureaucracy. Do not expect HROs to fill the hunger gap that the federal and state governments leave behind.
- **Support from Foundations:** Permanently change application and reporting requirements to make the process to apply for and administer grants more accessible for Frontline Organizations. Build relationships directly with Frontline Organizations who can most efficiently respond to the most immediate needs that arise during a crisis in their communities because they are in and of those communities.
- **Support from philanthropy (corporate donors, major individual donors, donor advised funds, etc.):** Reduce or eliminate restrictions on how funding can be used, especially during times of crisis or disaster. The organizational needs of HROs can change quickly and without warning as the external context during a disaster can just as swiftly change the needs of those most impacted. Allow for operation and staff costs; real property purchases such as refrigeration or trucks; people-focused services such as helping individuals enroll in social safety net programs; and advocacy for additional support from local, state or federal government.
- **Support HROs to engage in addressing hunger and food insecurity at its root causes as well as issues that intersect with food insecurity.** More than 20 million people live in persistent poverty counties in the U.S. The reason 60% of people living in these counties remain impoverished is because of income inequality (Gould and Davis 2015). Economic and racial injustice are at the root of food insecurity. Hunger is not a stand-alone issue. HROs need and want to connect to other HROs, organizations, networks and movements that are working to end poverty and become anti-racist organizations. Support HROs to address food insecurity in the short term by providing families with food while supporting their efforts to organize clients, volunteers and supporters to work towards living wages, safe working conditions, healthcare and housing for all, and a clean environment.

Below the authors identified their own recommendations with a focus on long-term systems change to support HROs in responding to disaster-related needs and in ending the need for emergency food in non-emergency times.

For HROs

- **Engage clients in defining and implementing advocacy agendas.** For example, [Neighbors Together](#), a soup kitchen in Brooklyn, NY started a [Community Action Program](#) to engage their clients in organizing around issues that have a direct impact on their daily lives, such as three-quarter housing and living wages.
- **Reevaluate measures of success for food insecurity work to focus on progress towards community economic stability and resilience - not pounds of food distributed and meals served.** [Closing the Hunger Gap](#) – a network of organizations and individuals working to expand hunger relief efforts beyond food distribution towards strategies that promote social justice and address the root causes of hunger – has developed a resource for supporting HROs in moving from a charity model to a social justice model, including changing measures of success to include a racial justice lens.
- **Start, continue or expand programs that address food insecurity at its root causes.** For instance, Washington state’s largest independent hunger relief agency, [Northwest Harvest](#), is working to shift public opinion and change policies and practices that perpetuate hunger, poverty and disparities while advocating for a right to food framing for statewide policies. The authors also uplift the [Black Church Food Security Network](#) whose work to ensure food security in Black communities is rooted in racial and economic justice by co-creating sustainable local food systems in partnership with Black churches, Black farmers and Black business owners.
- **Include client enrollment in social safety net programs as an operational priority.** The authors uplift the successes of [West Side Campaign Against Hunger](#) in New York City for focusing on social safety net enrollment as a measure of success.
- **Launch or join advocacy campaigns for affordable housing, living wages, and accessible healthcare – in addition to the standard advocacy efforts by many HROs to preserve and/or enhance SNAP, TEFAF, WIC and the NSLP.** The authors uplift the work of the [San Antonio Food Bank](#) in developing affordable housing for working families. A second example is, [The Community Food Bank of Southern Arizona](#) who joined a [coalition of nonprofits](#) that successfully advocated to raise the minimum wage to \$15/hour in Tucson.

For Philanthropy

- **Seek to fund projects that address problems and challenges holistically at their social, political and economic intersections.** The root cause of hunger is poverty which sits at the intersection of race, economic justice and political education. Seek to learn about the programs HROs are implementing and are chronically underfunded which strike at the roots of food insecurity.
- **Continue to build and reinforce relationships with HROs, particularly BIPOC-led and BIPOC-accountable organizations.** The authors uplift the relationship and food justice-centered critical action recommendations in the Duke World Food Policy Center/Center for Environmental Farming Systems report [North Carolina Food System Resilience Strategy](#).

- **Adapt foundation policies and practices in order to increase investment directly in Frontline Organizations that are embedded in their communities.**
- **Help communities bridge the gap between chronic food assistance needs and community food systems that are both sustainable and resilient.** Charitable food system investment is an insufficient band aid on food insecurity. Learn about Equitable Food Oriented Development (EFOD) as defined by [EFOD.org](https://www.efod.org/), and prioritize funding for programs/projects/organizations working to transition away from emergency food assistance to create community stability and wealth.
- **Reevaluate measures of success for food insecurity work to focus on progress towards community economic stability and resilience - not pounds of food distributed and meals served.** Collaborate with grantees and the communities they serve to identify holistic measures of success.
- **Invest in the learning and networking needs of HROs.** Support the building of processes and infrastructure that create opportunities for peer-to-peer learning.

For USDA

- **Continue to deepen the SNAP social safety net, and make P-EBT permanent.** The revision to the Thrifty Food Plan basis for SNAP benefits was long overdue, and the authors applaud USDA for driving the change during the pandemic.
- **Learn from state feedback and make SNAP waivers permanent to lift more families out of poverty.** The authors uplift Healthy Eating Research's report "[Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Waivers and Adaptations during the COVID-19 Pandemic, a Survey of State Agency Perspectives in 2020](#)."
- **Take steps to identify and understand the different characteristics and needs of communities in crisis vs. communities facing chronic, systemic problems--and adjust social safe net responses accordingly.**
- **Deepen the transparency of the USDA's emergency plan** and communications protocols so that supporting actors in emergency response can operate with less uncertainty and more efficiency.
- **Operationalize client choice of food, especially culturally appropriate food and food as medicine, as a core value in emergency food provision.** One size does not fit all with respect to food, and individuals need to be able to select foods that meet their specific health needs - particularly during an emergency.
- **Address the overabundance of processed foods in the food system** through food policy changes that prioritize societal health over industry profit, and hold industry responsible for the adverse societal impact of unhealthy foods.
- **Preserve small family farms and tribal communities that are producing nutritious food in concert with the local ecology** and maintain direct sales to consumers, local restaurants, schools and grocery outlets.
- **Adopt a set of values, policies and priorities that amplify investment in local and regional food and farm economies and in the health of our natural resources while recognizing that those preparing the soil, harvesting fruits, and stocking the grocery store shelves are "life-sustaining workers" that deserve good pay and just working conditions.**

- **Support community scale agroecological production and distribution while centering BIPOC as those most impacted across all sectors of the food system.**

Conclusion

At the time of writing this report, the COVID-19 pandemic continues, with new variants frustrating the pace of progress towards fewer limitations for public gatherings. However, national, state and local responses have evolved. Effective vaccines and widespread vaccine distribution are lessening workplace restrictions, increasing people's ability to commute and travel, and making it easier for individuals to share communal space. However, the world has not yet reached a post-pandemic state, or a new "normal." Although the Omicron variant seems to be near its peak in the U.S., the death rate is still rising and a new sub-variant has just been reported (CDC 2020; WHO 2021). While the tools we have available (vaccines, masks, etc.) are effective at lessening the severity and containing the spread, the pandemic and its impact on daily life, including food access, is far from over.

Food insecurity and its attendant issues, such as poor health related to racial disparities, are front and center in the public dialogue as growing numbers of "newly hungry" people have found themselves accessing emergency assistance as a result of job loss, delayed stimulus checks and other disruptions to income generation.

The pandemic arguably creates a crossroads moment for addressing food security in the U.S. The results of this survey, when placed alongside what we've witnessed and experienced during this COVID pandemic (food supply shortages due in part to inflexible vertically integrated food supply chains, job loss and industry downsizing, dizzyingly rapid increase in the number of people not able to put enough food on their tables), have revealed the fault lines in a food system that works primarily to increase corporate profit margins and tax benefits instead of guaranteeing the health and well-being of people residing in the U.S. It has also underscored the vast and critical role of private charitable HROs enabling working families to meet their food needs due in large part to the lack of government support to ensure that all workers are paid living wages.

Key Policy Changes and Increased Philanthropic Support Helped Keep U.S. Food Insecurity Rate at around 10% in 2020

At the height of the pandemic in mid-2020, estimated rates of food insecurity skyrocketed to between a staggering 16-20 % nationwide with some regions of the country reporting rates closer to 50% (Feeding America 2021). However, the federal Household Food Insecurity Report released in September 2021 found that by the end of 2020, the food insecurity rate among U.S. households had settled back at 10%, or 13.8 million households (Coleman-Jensen et al. 2021). In the final analysis, the official graphs representing annual rates of food insecurity will be depicted by a horizontal line connecting 2019 to 2020, despite the rapid and significant spike in Food Bank need and usage instigated by COVID-19 pandemic and supported by the images of long lines of cars or people wrapped around several blocks waiting for boxes of emergency food (USDA ERS 2021c).

It's critical to understand the extraordinary policy changes and philanthropic investments that allowed the U.S. to hold the line at just 10% food insecurity.

A temporarily strengthened social safety net (increased SNAP benefits and state waivers), the first reevaluation of the basis for SNAP benefits calculations since 1975 (the Thrifty Food Plan), and increased and extended unemployment benefits in 2020 accounts for the short-lived nature of the mid-2020 unprecedented spike in food insecurity, especially among those who found themselves for the first time in need of emergency provisions due to the pandemic (USDA n.d.; 2021b; DOI 2020). Real time tracking from the Census Bureau throughout 2020 confirms that cash payments from the federal government directly to people in need softened the blow of a sudden stagnant economy that left many people already living on the margins out of work, giving credence to the analysis that poverty is indeed the root

cause of food insecurity and that, when provided with cash assistance, needy families will spend it on meeting their basic needs (CBPP 2021; US Census Bureau 2021a).

A more detailed and nuanced story can be told about COVID-19's impact on food insecurity based on the experiences of more than an estimated 60,000 private charitable non-profit Hunger Relief Organizations (HROs). These organizations were on the front lines of ensuring people who were in need got access to food during the most worrisome months of the pandemic. This study intentionally focused on and sampled the experiences and activities of those HROs on the frontlines.

[One in five people living in the U.S., or approximately 60 million people sought food assistance during the height of the pandemic in 2020 – a rate 50% higher than the previous year](#) (Feeding America 2020b). The pandemic highlighted the inherent vulnerabilities in the private charitable emergency food system and how it is part and parcel of a broader food system with deep fault lines that, due to increasing corporate privilege and consolidation, lacks the resiliency required to weather external forces that shake the foundation of our economic and social realities.

Hunger Relief Organizations, largely supported by private charity and tax-dollar supported public benefits, account for the ways in which people living in the U.S. maintain at least a basic level of food security and therefore should be mobilized when needed. But more than 60,000 HROs in the U.S., including 200 Food Banks that make up the largest and most sophisticated private charitable food system in the world, have historically never been able to meet the demand nor make any permanent dent in the rate of food insecurity which has hovered between 10 and 12% in the U.S. for the past 30 years. HROs may safeguard against hunger, but they do not food insecurity.

The authors caution that skimming over the important mid-year time frame captured by this study is to miss the fact that coping through this pandemic has presented many challenges and amplified existing issues around food insecurity in the U.S. And, it simultaneously highlights the ways in which the exigencies of this crisis have fostered innovation and provided opportunities to create systemic solutions.

The Emergency Food System serves 10% of the population in “non-emergency” times

The U.S. is witnessing an emergency feeding system pushed to its limits, exposing the true extent of the hunger problem. Food Banks were originally intended to feed people during a crisis. However, they have become a de facto grocery store for [46.5 million people living in the U.S. every year](#) who travel to a food bank or food pantry to fill the gaps in their household's capacity to put enough food on the table (Feeding America 2014). SNAP, the most significant federal nutrition program, is used by over 40 million low-income people annually to enable them to afford a nutritionally adequate diet (CBPP 2018). (WIC provides nutrition food for about 7 million low-income women, infants, and children; and the school breakfast and lunch programs provide free or reduced-priced meals to over 20 million low-income children.)

SNAP is widely touted as an effective and dignified way to enhance the food purchasing power of eligible low-income individuals and families and has a well-researched [multiplier effect](#) on local economies (Canning and Stacy 2019). And yet, the program has critical shortcomings. The benefits for most households are not enough to get through the entire month without hunger or being forced to sacrifice nutrition quality. Second, [eligibility](#) is such that [50% of those who use Food Banks](#) in a given year have combined income and assets that put them just above the income threshold to qualify for SNAP, yet they still cannot afford to purchase enough nutritious food which is often one of the first non-fixed costs that families will reduce if it means they will be able to pay for lifesaving drugs, gas to get to work, childcare, or rent (Feeding America 2019b; CBPP 2018). These gaps normalize the private charitable emergency food system as a reliable, though often undignified way to secure food for a struggling household.

Charitable food levels are a barometer of food system equity and resilience

Feeding America reports that from April to December 2020, 6.1 billion pounds of food were distributed, compared with 4.0 billion during the same period in 2019. Early in the COVID-19 outbreak, one-third of people seeking charitable food were doing so for the first time.

[Weekly census surveys](#) consistently reported in 2020 that more than 10% of adults — and more than 15% of those in households with children — sometimes or often do not have enough to eat. For Black and Hispanic families, those rates are nearly 25% (Census Household Pulse Survey). That's more than three times the rates reported in a similar question about hunger in a 2019 survey (CBPP 2019). In addition, more than 51% of all food access programs rely entirely on volunteers. News stories across the country chronicled miles-long lines of cars and people waiting to receive pre-packed boxes and bags of food.

For the first time since the Great Depression, the issue of hunger in the U.S. was discernible to all. HROs continue to occupy a mythic role in the popular imagination as the primary way in which needy people get food and the best way to help fight hunger. The authors argue that this survey reveals an inflection point.

Much is at stake if the nation does not examine - and address - the ways that volunteer-run, philanthropic-supported organizations have been forced to meet the skyrocketing needs of a significant proportion of the population. Charitable food has become both normalized and institutionally entrenched. And, HROs will never be able to take the place of government policies that end and prevent economic injustice and poverty. Clearly HROs should not be dismantled in the face of the staggering increase of food insecurity brought on by this pandemic. There may always be a need for some level of charity-based emergency food provision. However, the authors argue that continuing to deepen governmental and philanthropic investment in the charitable food system - without attending to the root causes of food insecurity - is effectively a stop gap measure.

Wouldn't it be wonderful, to live in a country, in a world, where Food Banks just weren't necessary because food and food access was a right! What if just for a moment, we considered what the food system in America could look like if we started supporting programs (like SNAP & EITC/Universal Income) that stretch people's budgets and lift them out of poverty? What if, instead of providing people food, we gave them the money needed to purchase their own food; the foods they need, when they need them!?

— Food Bank Member

People are hungry and poor because, even when there are full-time working adults in the household, they can't afford to buy enough food to feed their family. 40% of those who benefit from SNAP are low-wage workers. They simply are not paid enough or provided with benefits like sick leave to adequately meet all their fixed costs and food. Decades of farm policy, supported by politicians on both sides of the aisle, has led to industrial-scale farms and food corporations that grow more fuel than food in place of family-owned farms and vibrant local and regional rural economies (Cassidy et al. 2013; National Family Farm Coalition; Farm Aid). People are hungry and disenfranchised because the social fabric of communities has been frayed, a legacy of racism permeates our institutions, and a culture of social protest, organizing and unionization is increasingly under threat (The Borgen Project 2021; Berg and Gibson 2022; Gaines-Turner 2018; Wright 2016).

The U.S. Can Shift from Charity to Food Justice

There is value in thinking about the ultimate goal in the fight against hunger, and the role of Hunger Relief Organizations in this path to zero hunger. As reported in the survey, many HROs are expanding their strategies to include helping clients get access to government nutrition programs, policy and advocacy to improve federal nutrition programs, and other federal and state policies that fall under the guise of anti-hunger responses. And a smaller but growing subset are beginning to address root causes of food insecurity (such as low wages, poor working conditions and structural racism) as part of their mission. In the Recommendation section of this report, we highlighted various organizations working towards this goal.

As the COVID-19 crisis reshapes public life around the globe, we can seize the opportunity to organize and protect everyone's most basic human right to nutritious food – not just in response to COVID-19 but as a springboard to a social and political economy that puts people and planet first.

The U.S. does not affirm the United Nation's right to food as codified in the [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#) (ICESCR). The U.S. has the ability to shift course and develop a legal framework for the right to nutritious food. If there's anything we've learned from the COVID-19 crisis, it's that governments, as we've witnessed at the state and city level, can mobilize quickly and with less bureaucracy to do the right thing. It is not only possible, but necessary to provide essential workers all along the food chain - from the fields to the processing plants to the supermarkets to the restaurants - a living wage, safe working conditions and access to health care. These are the issues and conditions at the heart of persistent poverty and food insecurity for all working families. HROs' experience navigating the COVID-19 pandemic provides us with the insight and the impetus to reshape our society built on the foundation of equity, resilience and sustainability.

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Appendices

APPENDIX A.1. SURVEY QUESTIONS

Q.0.1 What best describes your organization?

Q.0.2 What is the current status of your organization?

Q.0.3 Why did your organization have to close (either temporarily or permanently)?

Q.1.1 How does your organization measure impact?

Q.1.2 How has the COVID-19 crisis affected the services your organization provides?

Q.1.3 What kind of operational or policy changes has your organization had to make as a result of COVID-19?

Q.1.4 What operational or policy changes implemented as a result of COVID-19 does your organization plan to sustain as a permanent fixture of your food access or distribution model?

Q.1.5 – Has your organization had to cut or suspend any programs as a result of COVID-19?

Q.1.6 Prior to COVID-19, how much time did your organization dedicate to the activities below?

Q.1.7 Moving forward, how will your organization make time for these activities below?

Q.2.1 Which of the following contributed to your organization's successes during the COVID-19 crisis?

Q.2.2 Throughout the pandemic response, where did your organization find information on how to adapt its services?

Q.2.3 What problems or weaknesses in the emergency food system has the COVID-19 pandemic revealed?

Q.2.4 Which of these additional barriers has your organization encountered during the pandemic?

Q.2.7 How has the amount of funding for your organization changed?

Q.2.8 What additional support could networks, policymakers, or agencies provide to better support your organization's operations or mission?

Q.3.1 What problems or weaknesses in the food system has the COVID-19 pandemic revealed?

Q.3.2 How has COVID-19 affected the clients or population that your organization serves?

Q.3.3 Has your organization implemented any new programs to address issues revealed by COVID-19?

Q.3.4 – What, if any, policy, practice, or programming changes will your organization implement to address systemic issues in the food system?

Q.3.5 – What changes should be made at the local and/or national policy level that may lead to more resilience in the food system for a similar future crisis?

Q.3.6 Has your organization shifted to address racial inequities in the food system, which have been exacerbated by COVID-19?

Q.3.7 Is there anything else that your organization would like to share about COVID-19 and the future of the food system?

Q.4.1 and 4.2 – Has your organization experienced a change in the number of volunteers or staff as a result of COVID-19?

Q.4.3 Have any staff members or volunteers contracted COVID-19?

Q.4.4 Has your organization had adequate access to PPE and health monitoring items, such as masks, gloves, thermometers, etc.?

Q.4.5 How is your organization getting PPE (gloves, masks, thermometers, etc.)?

Q.5.1 How long has your organization been in operation?

Q. 5.2 What is the geographical service area of your organization?

Q. 5.3 Where is your organization, main office, or headquarters located? (Please specify city/county and state)?

Q.5.4 – Is your organization part of a larger network?

Q.5.5 What was the average operating budget of your organization before COVID-19?

APPENDIX A.2. SURVEY RESULTS

Q.0.1 What best describes your organization?

Survey respondents self selected into one of the following type of organizations, as follows:

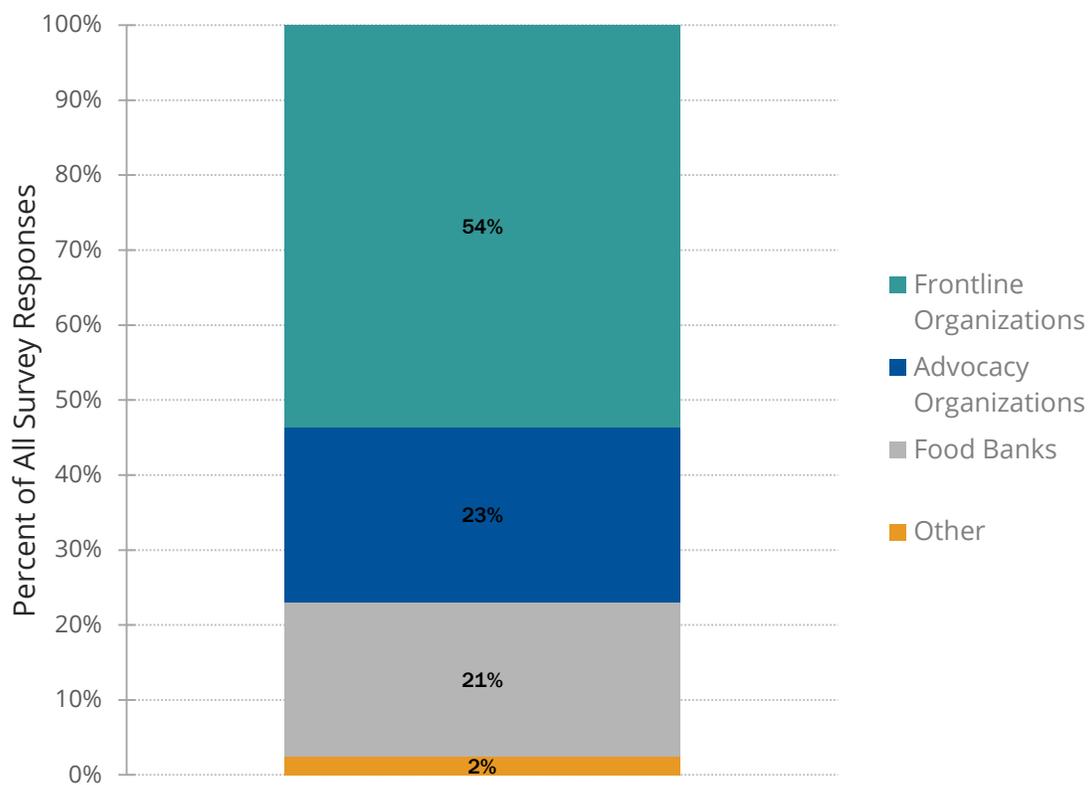
Frontline Organizations: Community-based or Frontline Organizations providing food directly to people in need

Advocacy Organizations: Anti-hunger organizations that do not provide direct services but whose mission includes ending or lessening food insecurity

Food Banks: Food Banks procuring and distributing food for frontline food access organizations and/or providing direct food access to people in need

Over half of respondents (n=133) were Frontline Organizations. Advocacy Organizations (n=58) and Food Banks (n=51) each represented around a fifth to a quarter of respondents. There were also respondents who selected 'other' (n=6). These were people who work at farmers markets (n=2), food hubs (n=2), and food recovery organizations (n=2). For the sake of the coherency of this report, we excluded them from the analysis.

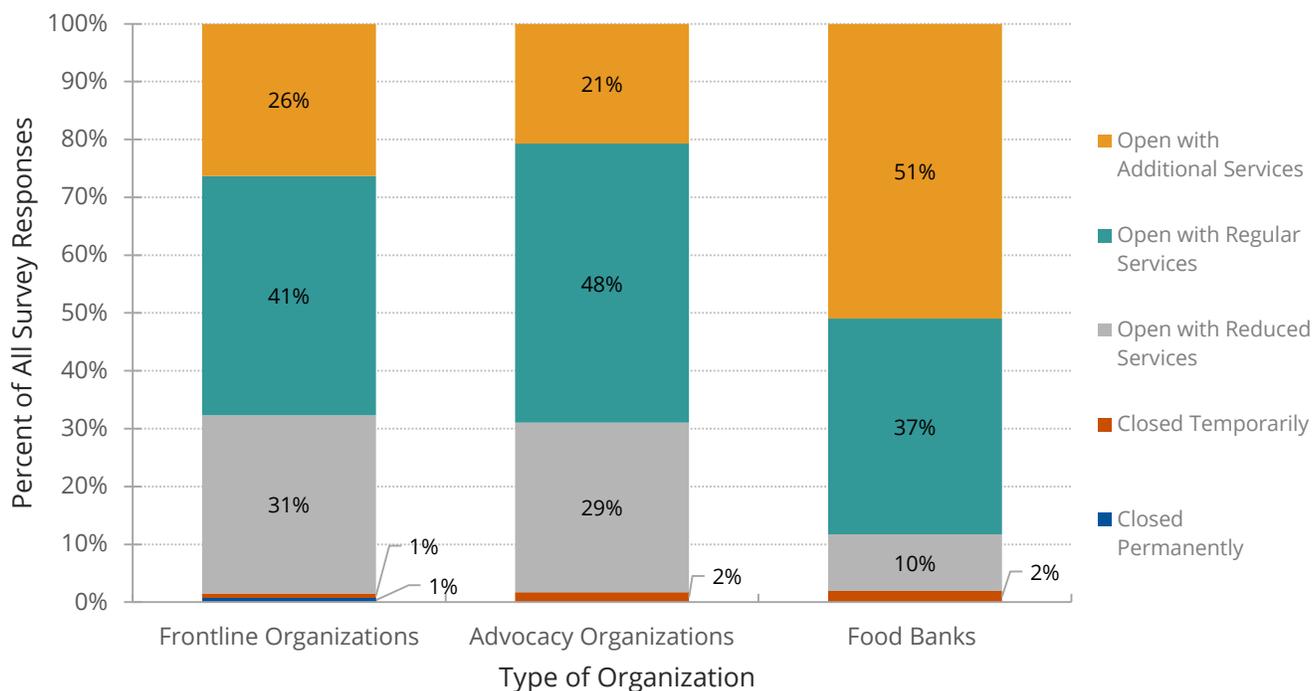
Figure A.1. Categorization of survey respondents



Q.0.2 What is the current status of your organization?

Frontline Organizations and Advocacy Organizations were mostly open with regular services (41% and 48%, respectively). Food Banks had much higher percentages of respondents indicating additional services (51 percent for Food Banks, compared to 26% and 21% for Frontline Organizations and Advocacy Organizations, respectively).

Figure A.2. Organizations reporting open or closed operations



Q.0.3 Why did your organization have to close (either temporarily or permanently)?

Three respondents reported that their organizations closed temporarily and one that closed permanently. When asked to elaborate on the reasons behind the closure, the three organizations explained as follows:

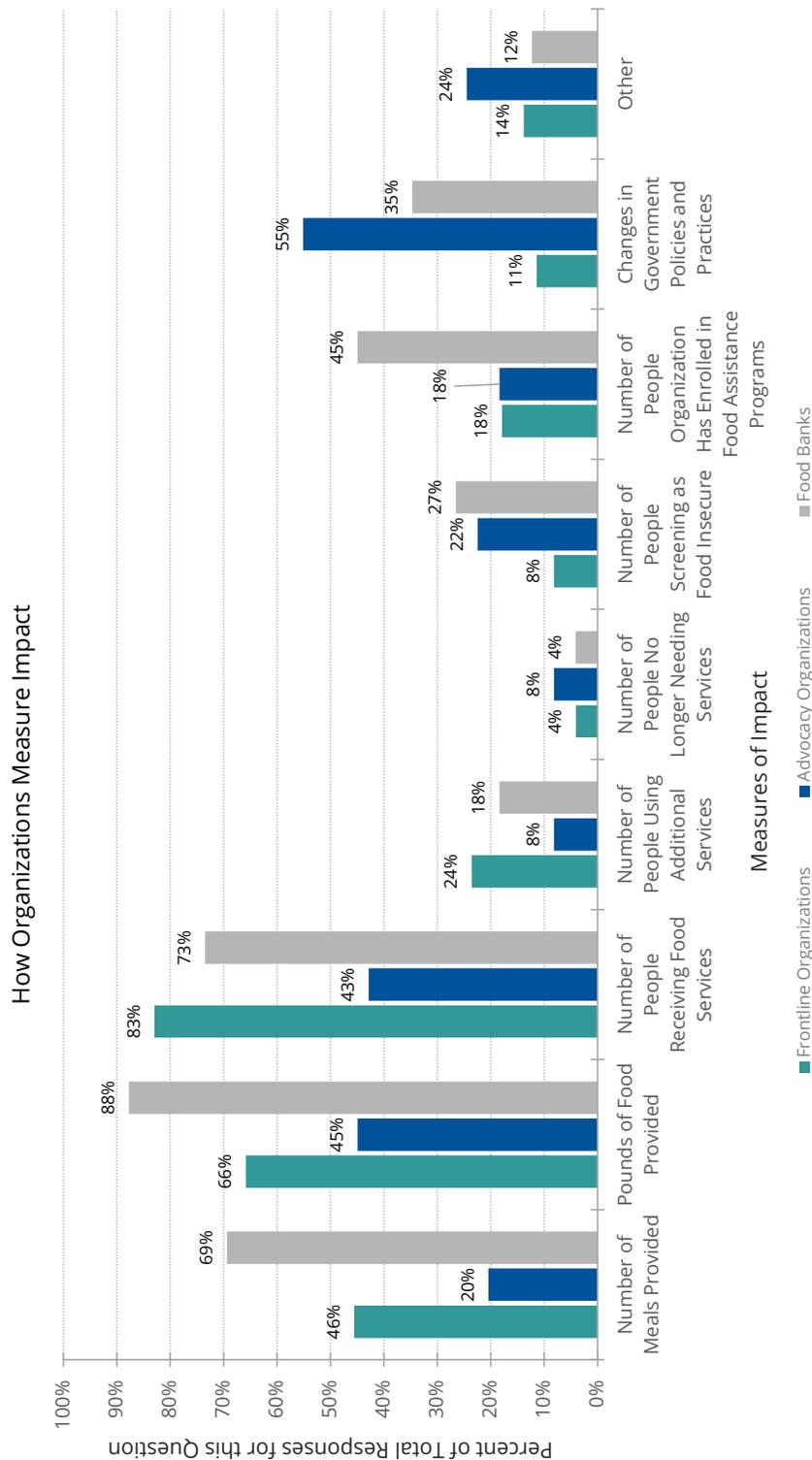
- Funding and shift in organizational focus
- Dwindling vendor participation because of pandemic fears
- Consolidation of delivery and logistical operations in light of COVID-19

Q.1.1 How does your organization measure impact?

Respondent Frontline Organizations primarily measure impact as the number of people receiving food services (83%), the pounds of food provided (66%), and the number of meals provided (46%). These organizations did not report measuring impact based on the number of people no longer needing services (4%), the number of people screening as food insecure (8%), or changes in government policies and practices (11%). Respondent Food Banks also primarily measure impact as pounds of food provided (88%), the number of people receiving food services (73%), and the number of meals provided (69%). These organizations did report measuring impact based on the number of people no

longer needing services (4%) or the number of people using additional services (18%). Unlike other organization types, Food Banks indicated they also measure impact as the number of people they enrolled in food assistance programs (45%). Respondent Advocacy Organizations measured impact via changes in government policies and practices the highest (55%), followed by the same food- and meal-based measures as the other organizations (45% indicated pounds of food provided and 43% indicated number of people receiving food services). Unlike other organizations, Advocacy Organizations did not report measuring success through the number of meals provided (20%).

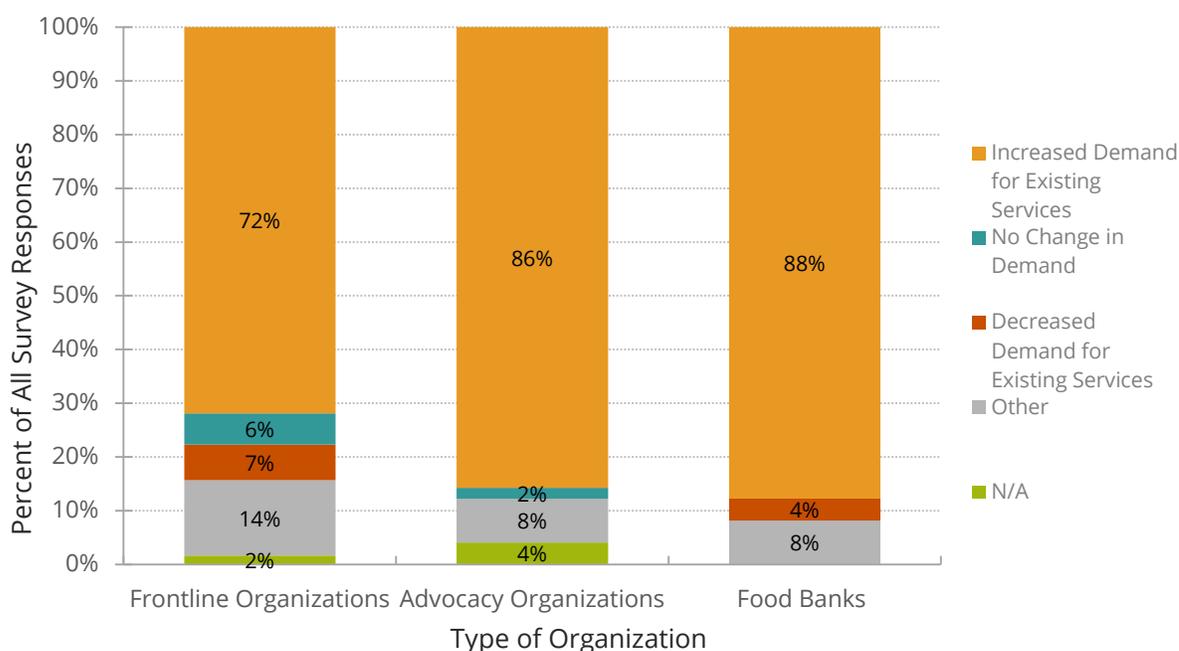
Figure A.3. How organizations measure impact



Q.1.2 How has the COVID-19 crisis affected the services your organization provides?

The overwhelming majority of organizations experienced an increase in demand for services (72% of Frontline Organizations, 86% of Advocacy Organizations, and 88% of Food Banks). Very few organizations had no change or a decrease in demand (6% and 7% for Frontline Organizations, 2% and 0% for Advocacy Organizations, and 0% and 4% for Food Banks, respectively). In the 'Other' category of responses, the explanations mentioned different forms of variation in the demand for services. Organizations experienced a variation in demands across time, such as *"Increased, then decreased, now increasing again"*, across different types of services, such as: *"Two main food programs--with our food pantry, we switched to drive-thru open distributions where folks could visit once a week from March through June. Saw a giant increase in individuals served. In July, transitioned back to once monthly appointments and have seen fewer folks than prior to COVID. With our fresh food distributions, slowed down when pantry had weekly open distributions but have returned to average numbers served"*. Or across the population served, such as: *"Very unpredictable. Some distributions high, some low, no pattern. With not having full in person full choice model open we are serving less. We are serving significant increase in NEW clients"*.

Figure A.4. Impact of COVID-19 on Services



Q.1.3 What kind of operational or policy changes has your organization had to make as a result of COVID-19?

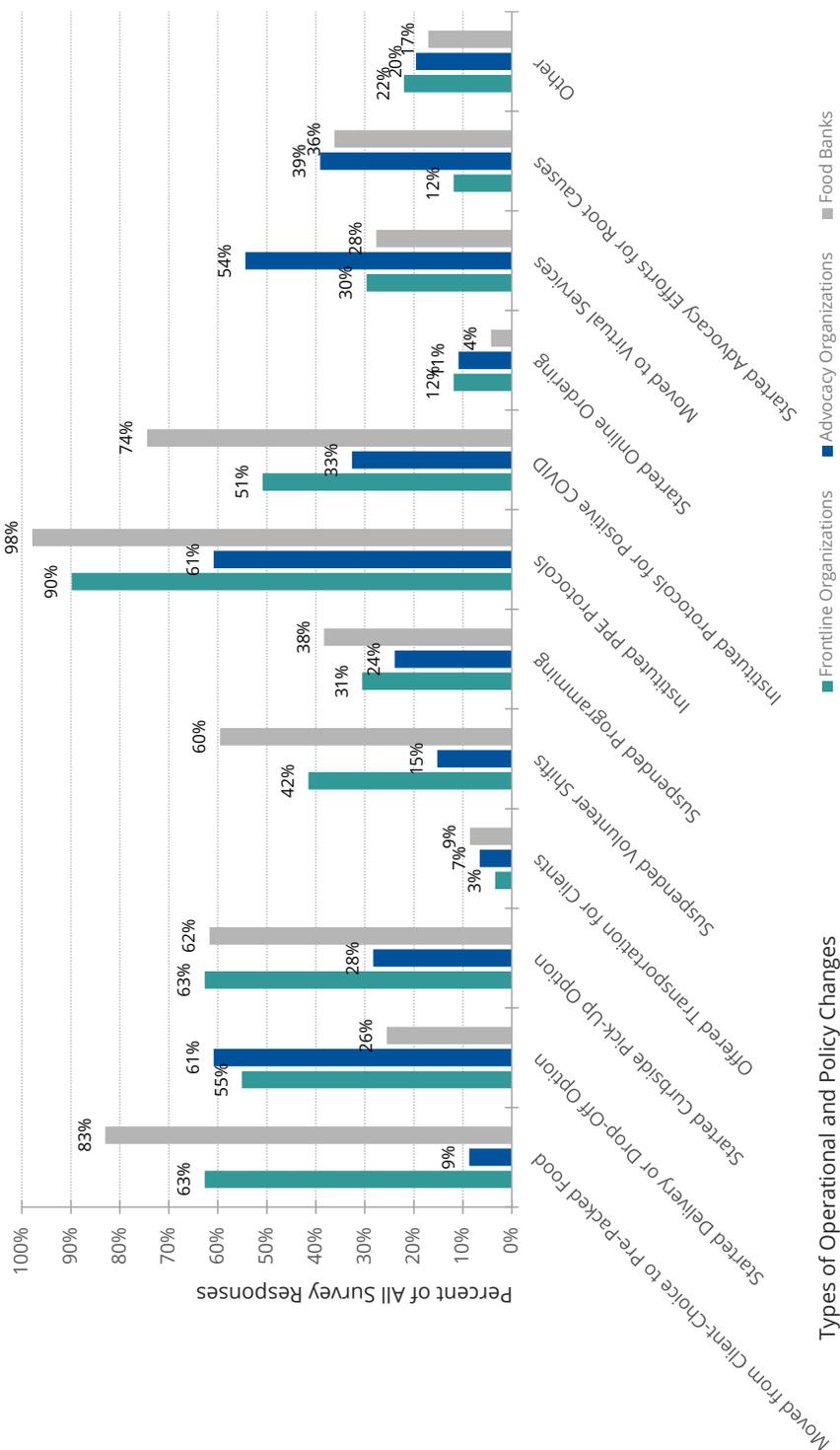
Respondent Frontline Organizations primarily shifted operations to make sure they could still provide food during COVID. Almost all Frontline Organizations instituted PPE protocols (90%), with 51% percent of organizations moved from client-choice to pre-packed food, 63% started curbside pickup, and 55% started delivery or drop off. Only 12% of organizations started advocacy efforts to address root causes. Food Banks had similar patterns as Frontline Organizations but at higher rates, with 98% instituting PPE protocols and 74% instituting protocols for positive COVID tests.

Respondent Food Banks had the highest rates of organizations suspending volunteer shifts, with 60% compared to 42% for Frontline Organizations and 15% for Advocacy Organizations. In terms of shifting practices, 83% moved from client-choice to pre-packed food and 62% started curbside pick-up. However,

only 26% started delivery or drop-off options. Some Food Banks (36%) did indicate starting efforts to address root causes in their changes.

Respondent Advocacy Organizations had lower rates for most options, but a majority of organizations did institute PPE protocols (61%) to protect against COVID. In terms of client focused operational shifts, 61% of organizations started delivery or drop-off options and 54% moved to virtual services. Almost 40% of organizations indicated they started advocacy efforts to address root causes.

Figure A.5. Operational and Policy Changes Organizations Made as a Result of COVID-19

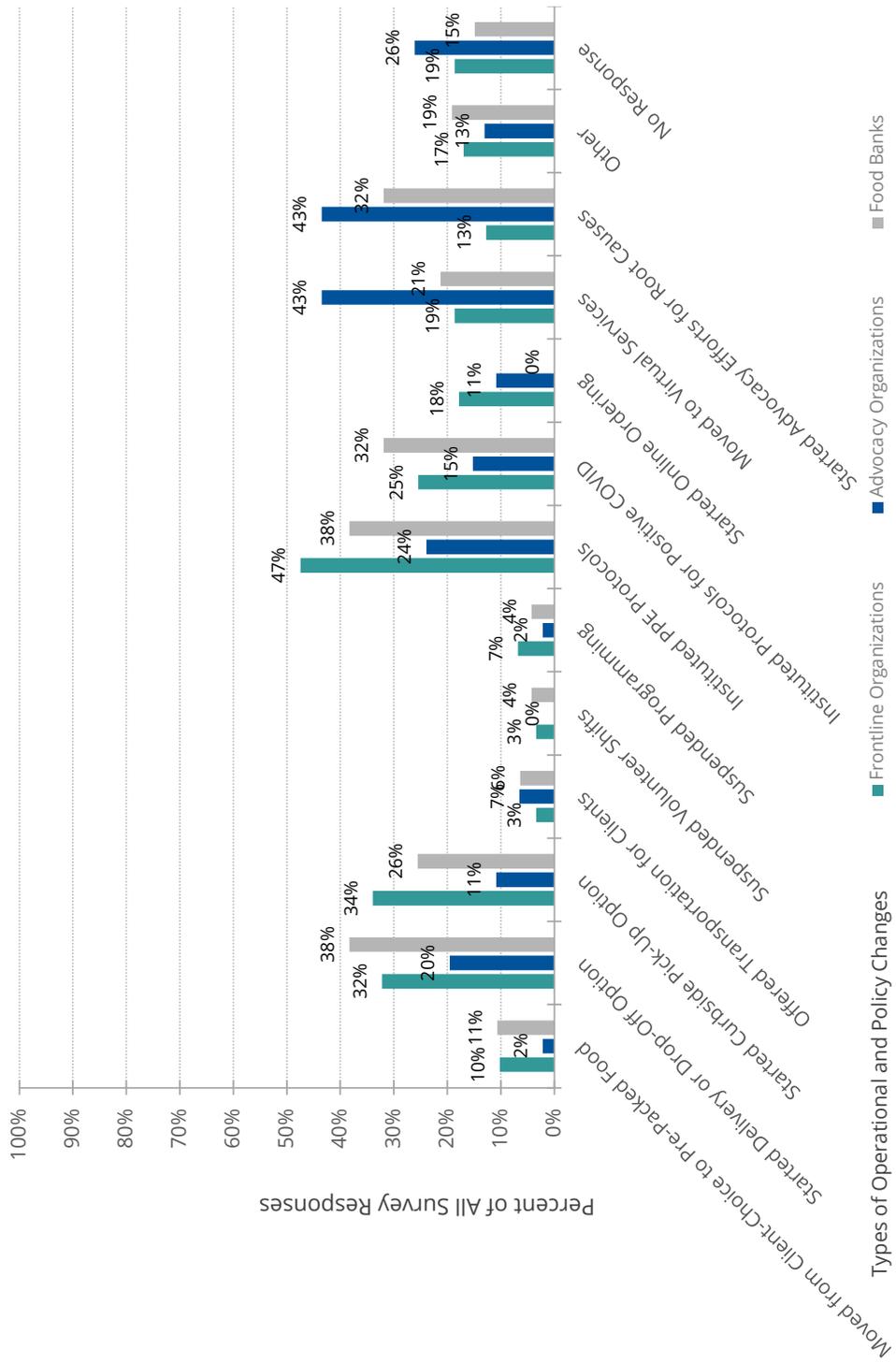


In the 'Other' responses category, organizations provided expanded commentary on many of the existing multiple choice options, such as saying that they first moved to pre-packed, but then reinstated client-choice. They mentioned innovative ways they pivoted to serve their clients and their communities in a COVID-19 safe manner. Some examples include setting up outdoor patio to keep client-choice, drive-through pick-up, instituting appointment-only pick-up, lifting the limits on how many meals people can pick up to reduce the lines. In addition, respondents mentioned being involved in new programs such as distribution of USDA food boxes, donating CSA boxes, becoming a local connector for information/resources/data about community hunger levels.

Q.1.4 What operational or policy changes implemented as a result of COVID-19 does your organization plan to sustain as a permanent fixture of your food access or distribution model?

Respondent organizations overwhelmingly reported they will not be continuing many of the changes they made as a result of COVID, with responses lower than 50% for all options across organizations. Frontline Organizations reported they will still have some PPE protocols (47%); and one-third will also continue some socially distanced food distribution options, such as delivery or drop-off (32%) and curbside pick-up (34%). Food Banks indicated similar plans, with 38% maintaining PPE protocols, 38% continuing with delivery or drop-off, and 26% continuing curbside pick-up. Additionally, almost one-third of Food Banks will engage in advocacy and policy efforts around root causes. Advocacy Organizations had different plans, focusing on continuing virtual services (43%) and root cause advocacy efforts (43%).

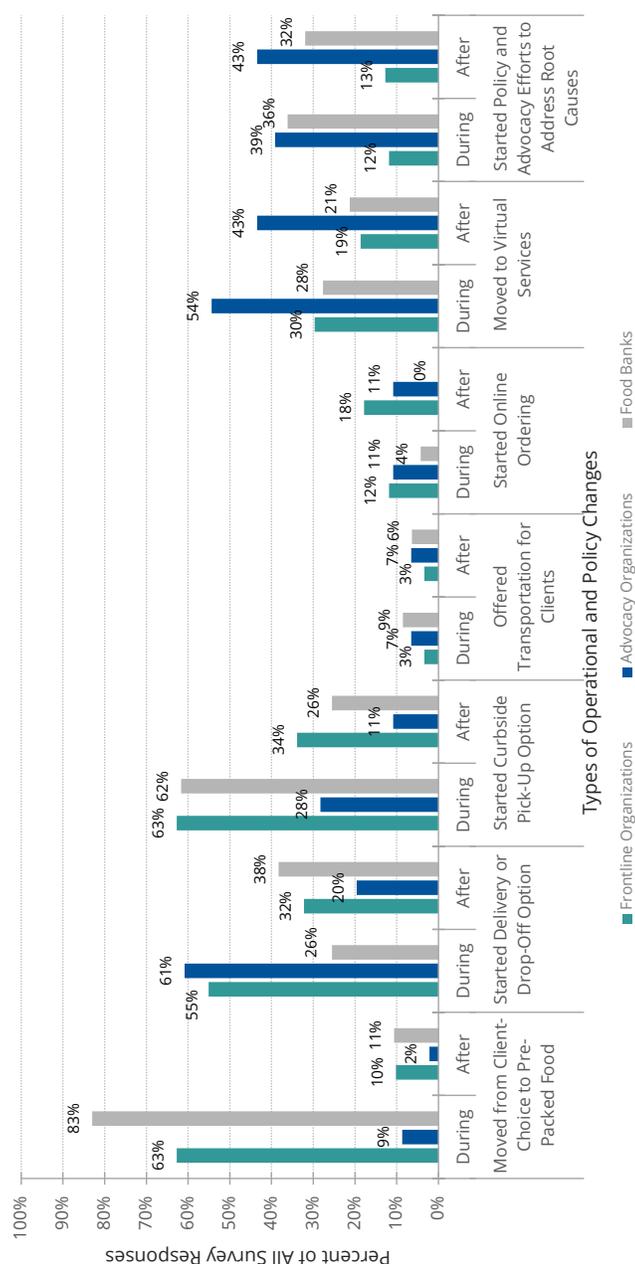
Figure A.6. Operational and Policy Changes Organizations Made as a Result of COVID-19



Some respondent organizations indicated that it was too soon to know what changes would retain beyond the pandemic in the 'Other' response category. Some mentioned that they were already doing online ordering or advocacy efforts for root causes before the pandemic and will continue to do so. They had not started the service in response to the pandemic. Some mentioned that they will continue appointment-only approach they developed during the pandemic.

In comparison, respondent Frontline Organizations indicated they will likely move away from the switch to pre-packed food (63% during COVID versus 10% planned to continue after). Frontline Organizations still plan on maintaining some of the operational changes they made, with delivery or drop-off options decreasing from 55% to 32%, curbside pick-up decreasing from 63% to 32%, and virtual services from 30% to 19%. Frontline Organizations had higher rates for two changes, with started online ordering increasing from 12% to 11% and started policy and advocacy efforts increasing from 12% to 13%.

Figure A.7. Operational and Policy Changes Organizations Made as a Result of COVID and Will Sustain Post-COVID



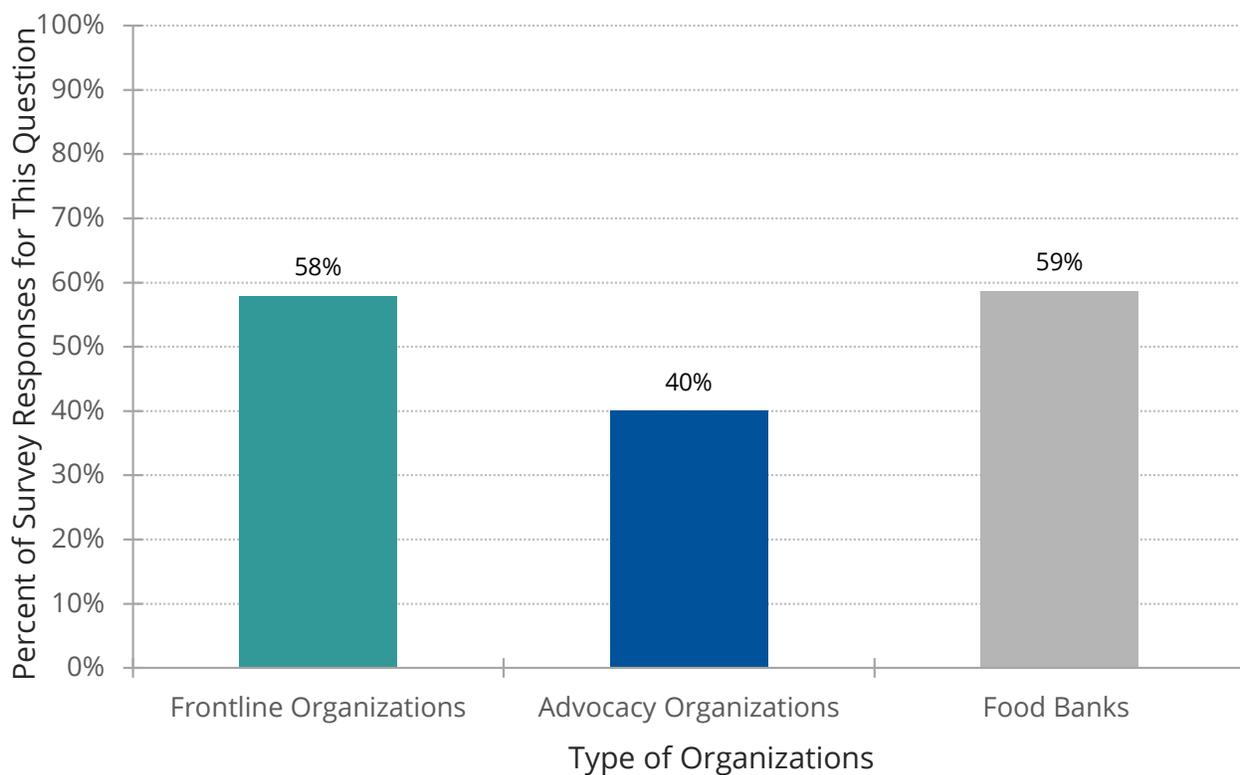
Respondent Food Banks reported a slightly different pattern. These organizations indicated higher rates for a delivery and drop-off option post-COVID than during COVID (26% compared to 38%). Plans to continue all other changes after COVID showed decreases. Plans for moving from client choice to pre-packed food decreasing substantially (83% compared to 11%). Starting a curbside pick-up option and starting policy and advocacy efforts also decreasing, 61% compared to 26% and 36% compared to 32%, respectively.

Respondent Advocacy Organizations had the lower overall response rates for most changes, and as a result did not have large differences between changes instituted because of COVID and changes the organizations will sustain after COVID. Over 40% of organizations indicated they would still sustain moves to virtual services (43% compared to 54% because of COVID) and the start of policy and advocacy efforts to address root causes post-COVID (43% compared to 43%).

Q.1.5 Has your organization had to cut or suspend any programs as a result of COVID-19?

Respondent Food Banks were the most likely to suspend programming, with 59%, followed closely by Frontline Organizations, with 58%. Respondent Advocacy Organizations had lower rates, with only 40% suspending programs.

Figure A.8. Organizations Had to Suspend Programming Due to COVID-19



Programs that were cut or suspended can be grouped into four categories: 1) training and education; 2) specialty programs; 3) in-person food provisions; and 4) volunteerism.

Examples of training and education programs include cooking classes, culinary training, health offerings and nutrition education. There were 40 survey responses that we classified as training and education, the most of any category.

Specialty projects include those for the homeless, school children and activities aimed at seniors. There were 37% that indicated these types of programs were curtailed, the second highest category. Examples included hygiene services (showers, haircuts laundry) as well as after school meals for school-aged children.

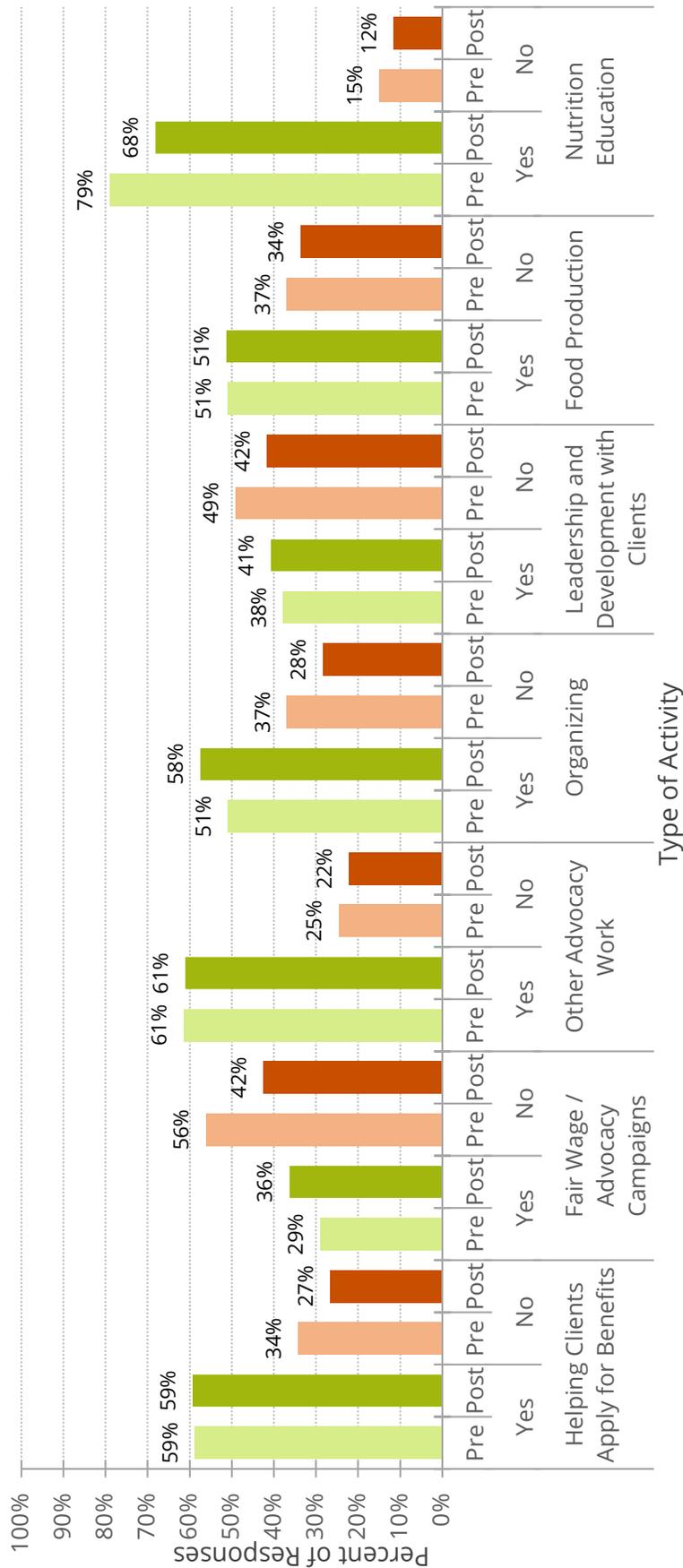
The pandemic caused disruptions to multiple in-person food provisions, including monthly or weekly congregate meals, mobile markets, on-site pantries and on-site sit-down dinners. Twenty-eight (28) of the responses could be grouped into this category.

The final category was volunteer programs. These include activities such as transportation, clothing closets, and gardens. Only a small handful (6) of the responses could be placed in this category.

**Q.1.6 Prior to COVID-19, how much time did your organization dedicate to the activities below?
and Q.1.7 Moving forward, how will your organization make time for these activities below?**

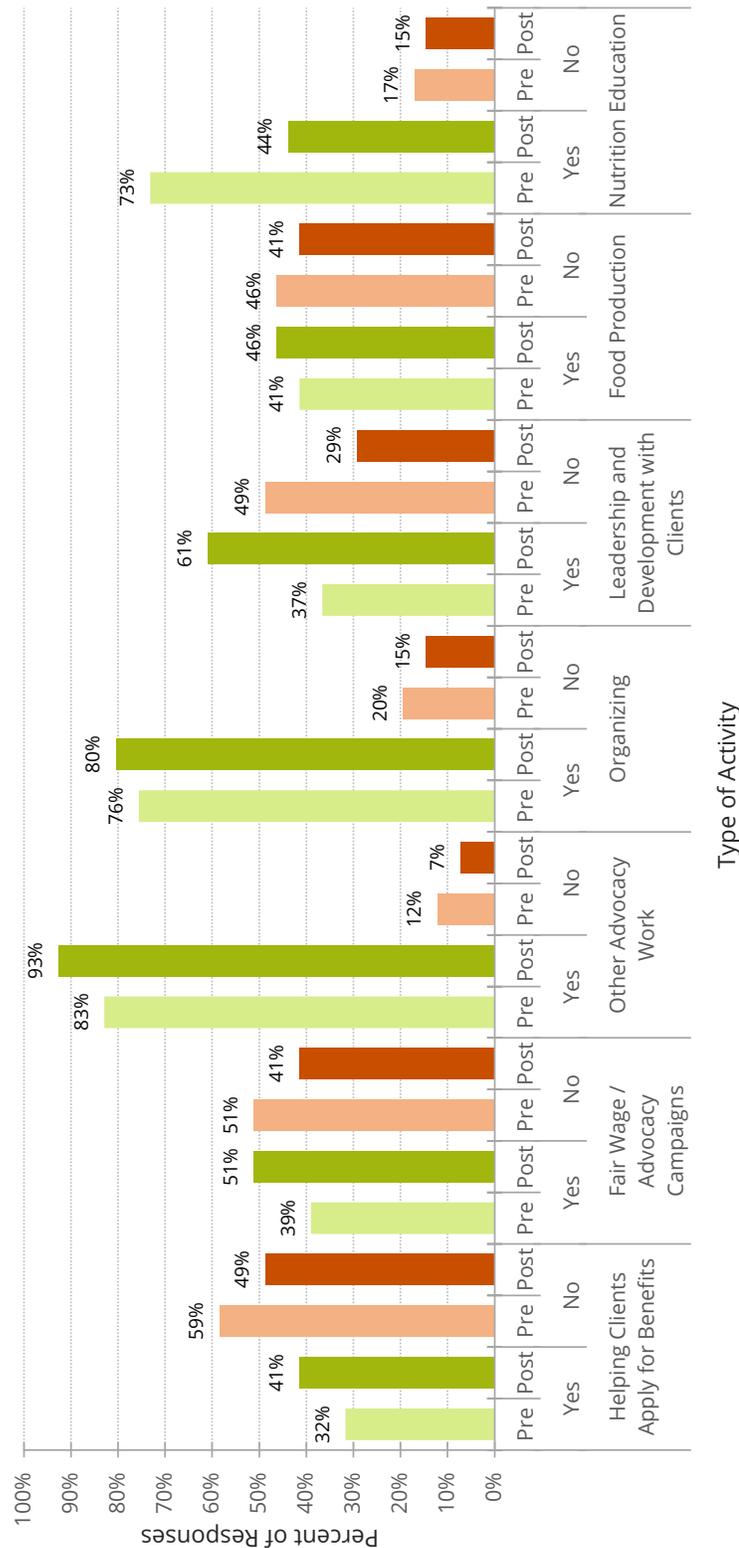
We asked respondent HROs whether they spend time on the following activities prior to the pandemic as well as moving forward: helping clients apply for benefits, on fair wage/advocacy campaigns, on other advocacy work, on organizing, on leadership and development with clients, on food production, and on nutrition education. With the exception of nutrition education, higher number of HROs plan to spend time on these activities. The difference for pre-post time dedicated to these activities are displayed in Figure A.9 for Frontline Organizations, Figure A.10 for Advocacy Organizations, and Figure A.11 for Food Banks.

Figure A.9. Frontline Organizations Spent Time on These Activities Pre-COVID and Will Spend Time Post-COVID



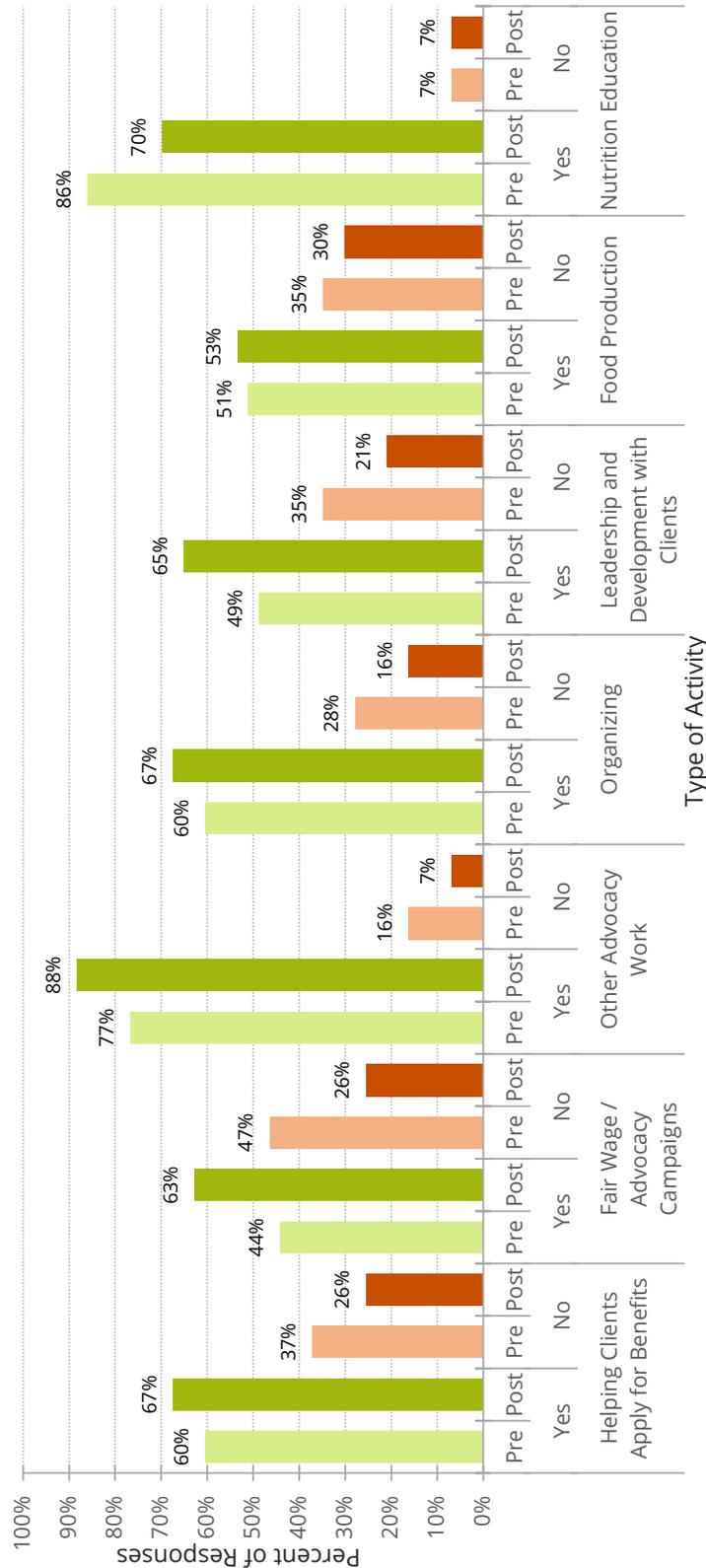
For respondent Food Banks and Frontline Organizations, the activity that the highest number of organizations mentioned dedicating time to was nutrition education. When 79% of Frontline Organizations said they spent time on nutrition education prior to COVID-19, 68% said they plan to dedicate their time to these programs. The numbers go from 86% to 80% for Food Banks and 73% to 44% for Advocacy Organizations.

Figure A.10. Advocacy Organizations Spent Time on These Activities Pre-COVID and Will Spend Time Post-COVID



On the other hand, spending time on fair wage/advocacy campaigns was on low priority for the majority of the HROs prior to the pandemic. Moving forward, more HROs plan to dedicate time to this activity. There seems to be an increase of 7% of Frontline Organizations, 12% increase of Advocacy Organizations, and 19% increase of Food Banks. Similar trend was observed for Other Advocacy work for Food Banks and Advocacy Organizations.

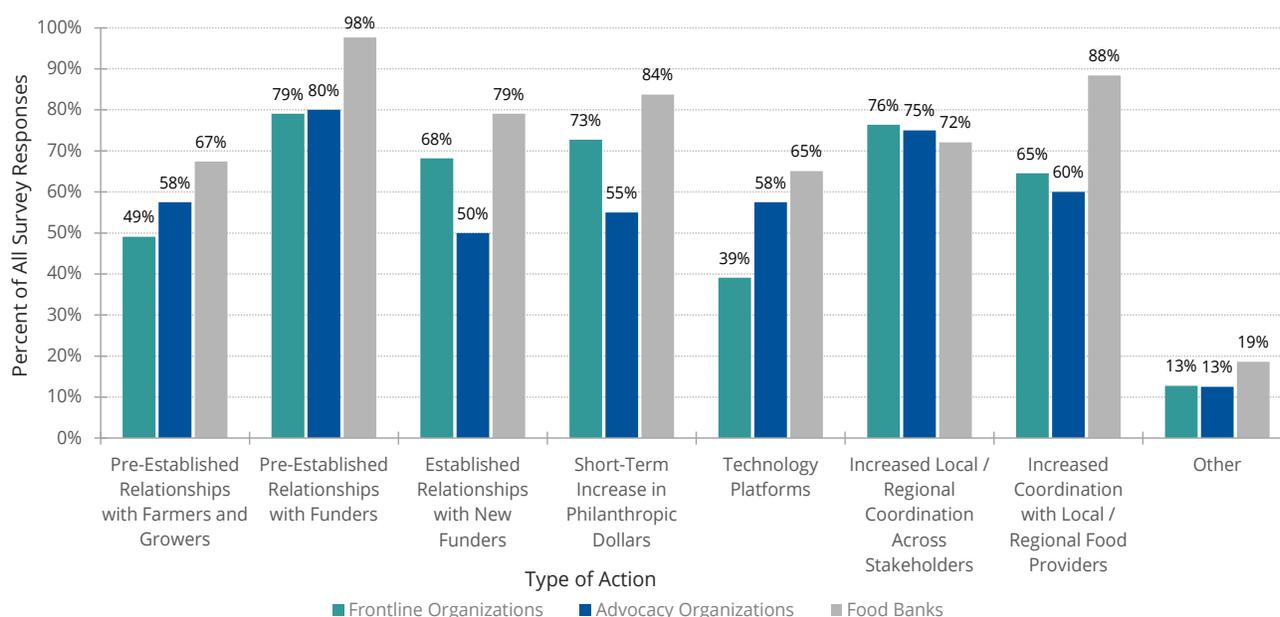
Figure A.11. Food Banks Spent Time on These Activities Pre-COVID and Will Spend Time Post-COVID



Q.2.1 Which of the following contributed to your organization's successes during the COVID-19 crisis?

Pre-established relationships with funders seemed most important, with all organization types ranking it high (79% for frontline organization, 80% for Advocacy Organizations, and 98% for Food Banks). In addition to pre-established relationships, Frontline Organizations also selected increased local/regional coordination across stakeholders (76%) and a short-term increase in philanthropic dollars (73%) as contributing to organizations' successes. Similarly, Advocacy Organizations also selected increased local/regional coordination of stakeholders (75%). All other options for Advocacy Organizations had around 40% or less of organizations selecting them. Around 84% of Food Banks selected short-term increases in philanthropic dollars as contributing to success, followed by 88% selecting increased coordination with local/regional food providers. Overall, technology platforms were the least selected, as was pre-established relationships with farmers and growers.

Figure A.12. Actions Contributing to Organization's Success during COVID-19



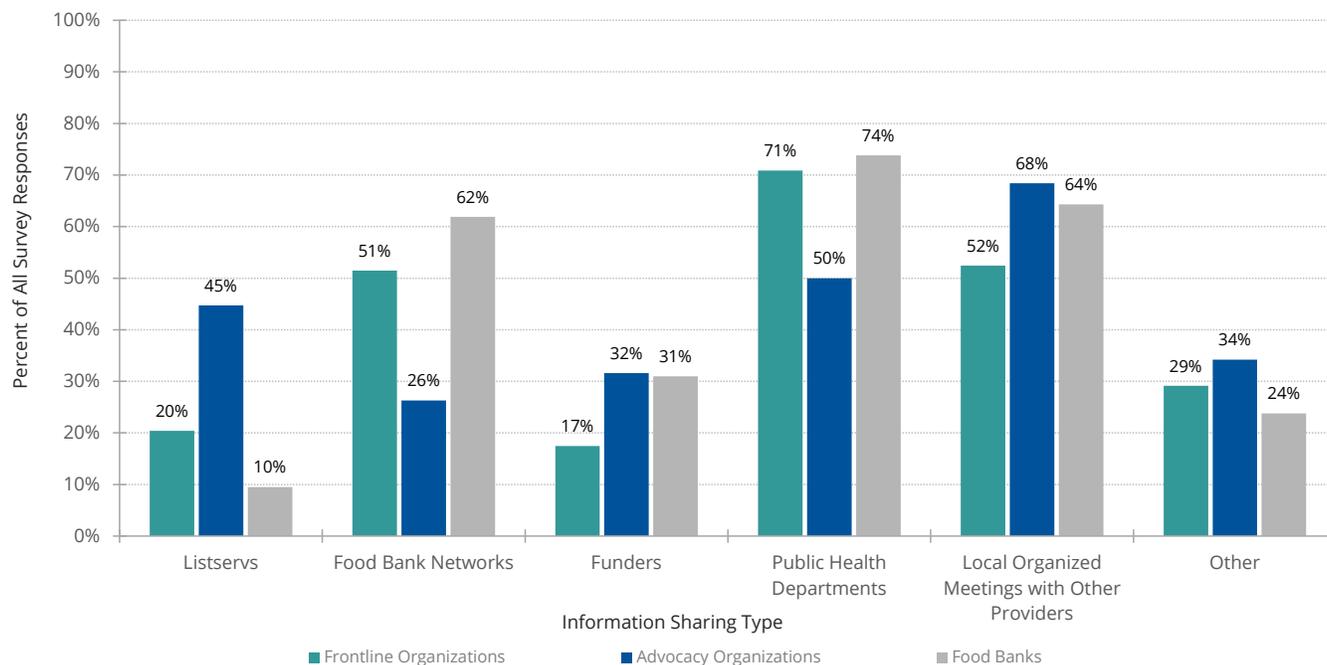
Some of the responses that organizations elaborated on in the 'Other' category were similar to the multiple-choice options, such as more details on what kind of technology platforms, or pre-established relationships/partnerships with peer organizations. The highlights included: bringing in the National Guard, outreach to new volunteers, staff being "*amazing and flexible*" to pivot during this time.

Q.2.2 Throughout the pandemic response, where did your organization find information on how to adapt its services?

Local organized meetings with other providers were important to accessing information throughout the pandemic across respondent organization types (52% for Frontline Organizations, 68% for Advocacy Organizations, and 64% for Food Banks). Public health departments and food bank networks were most important for Frontline Organizations in obtaining information during the pandemic (71% and 51%, respectively) and Food Banks (74% and 71%, respectively). The 'Other' option was selected at a

much higher rate for this question compared to previous questions (29% for Frontline Organizations, 34 percent for Advocacy Organizations, and 24% for Food Banks). Figure A.12.

Figure A.13. Avenues for sharing and accessing information during pandemic

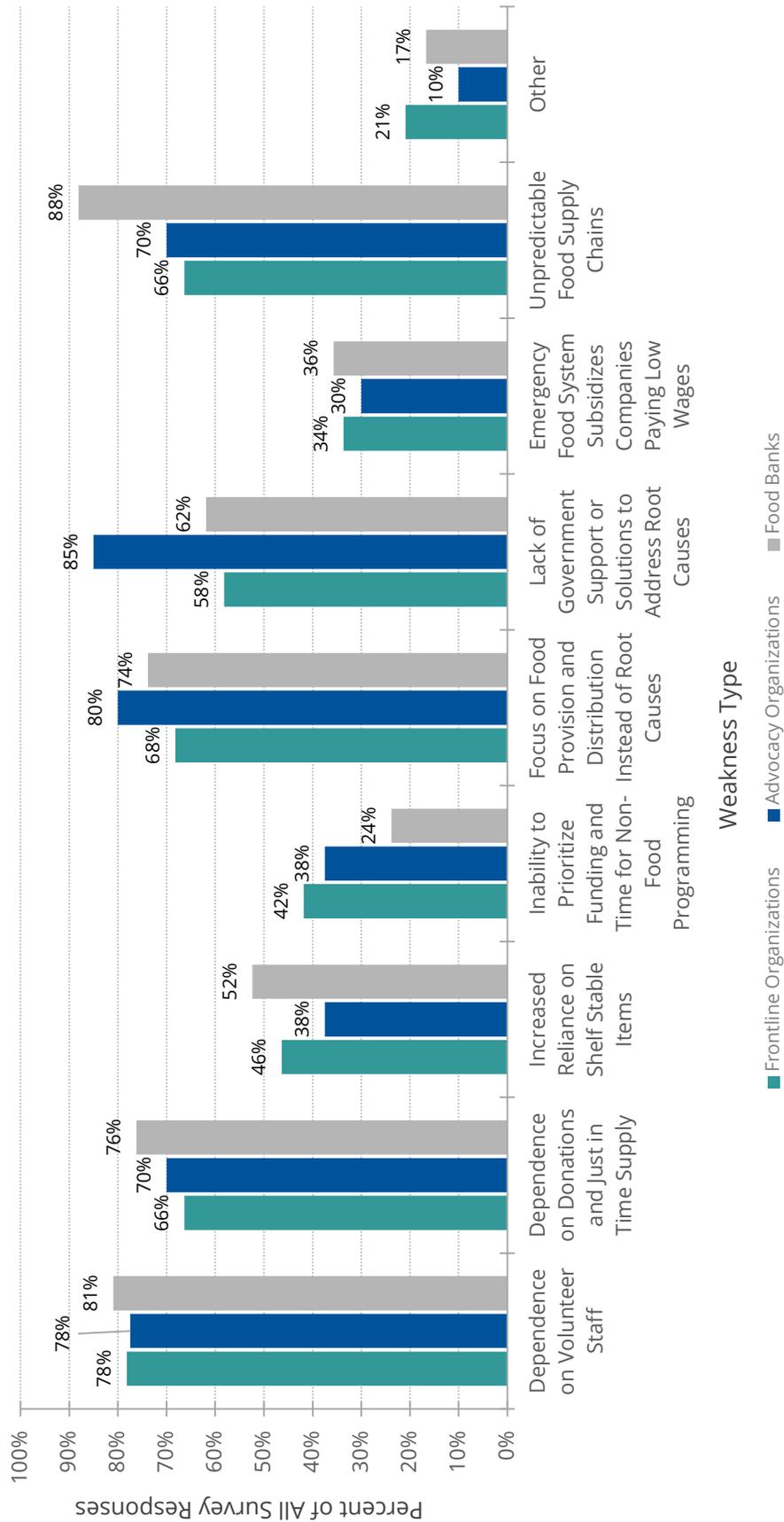


In the 'Other' category, some notables mentioned included: government (CDC, USDA, State Governments, etc.); some type of either pre-established or newly created taskforce, council, or committee; and within the different parts of their own organization (such as the Board and staff). In addition, here are some of the mentioned listsers/networks that organizations used to share and/or access information: Feeding America, Second Harvest, Closing the Hunger Gap, Food Research Action Center, Comfood listserv, and The Food Group.

Q.2.3 What problems or weaknesses in the emergency food system has the COVID-19 pandemic revealed?

A dependence on volunteer staff was reported as a deep weakness by all respondent organization types, as was dependence on donations and just in time supply, focus on food provision and distribution instead of root causes, and unpredictable supply chains. Frontline Organizations selected dependence on volunteer staff (78%) the most, followed by focus on food provision (68%), unpredictable food supply chains (66%), and dependence on donations and just in-time supply (66%). Advocacy Organizations selected lack of government support or solutions to address root causes (85%) the most, followed by focus on food provision and distribution instead of root causes (80%) and dependence on volunteer staff (78%). Food Banks selected unpredictable food supply chains (88%) the most, followed by dependence on volunteer staff (81 percent) and dependence on donations and just-in-time supply (76%).

Figure A.14. Weaknesses in the Emergency Food System



In the 'Other' category, there were mentions of:

1) broader societal issues, such as: *"Most vulnerable populations are undocumented", "That the social safety net in this country is completely broken. The additional federal government funds for individuals were helpful, but should be ongoing not temporary", and "Underpaid employees providing human services to the community; human service organization's lack the option and availability for employees to take mental health days."*

2) infrastructure challenges, such as: *"Infrastructure to support food access. In rural Vermont transportation or lack thereof was a huge issue for people in need of food. Access is critical! Also, in VT we struggle with reliable/adequate internet access - people cannot access a food distribution that they are completely unaware of! Infrastructure is a HUGE weakness" and "Our agency was already under-resourced before the pandemic and our infrastructure was old, that made it harder to be nimble and adapt to necessary changes. The local political environment has been challenging as well, with the local health department saying one thing, and statewide/national groups saying something else", and*

3) lack of coordination, such as: *"lack of coordination across food providers, with city, etc. everyone doing 'good work' no one doing great sustainable work."*

Other notable comments:

"Feeding America, which frankly, has absolutely no benefit for our clients. But, they can afford the lobbyists and other ways of connecting with resources. I'm sure they did good elsewhere. It just doesn't trickle down to our county and I'm sure we are not alone in that. We also saw that Food Lion, for instance, began using the Food Banks in their grant-making decisions and the flow of money. This is distressing because it makes them an additional gatekeeper and that can be fraught with issues of favoritism, etc. We had one of our best years ever, so much that I feel some survivor's guilt. So, this is not someone blaming everyone for any issues we're having. But, it is someone with an eye to say that how we pump our money and resources in to different systems in a crisis needs to really be better addressed. Are we recognizing high-performing direct service providers and building capacity? Or, are you giving more power to groups that more worried about their org than the whole of all the orgs in their extended area?" and

"Like the states competing with the federal government for PPE, we wound up having to compete with our food bank for food and PPE. Also, I think it magnified the disparity between Feeding America and/or Food Banks and the Food Pantries."

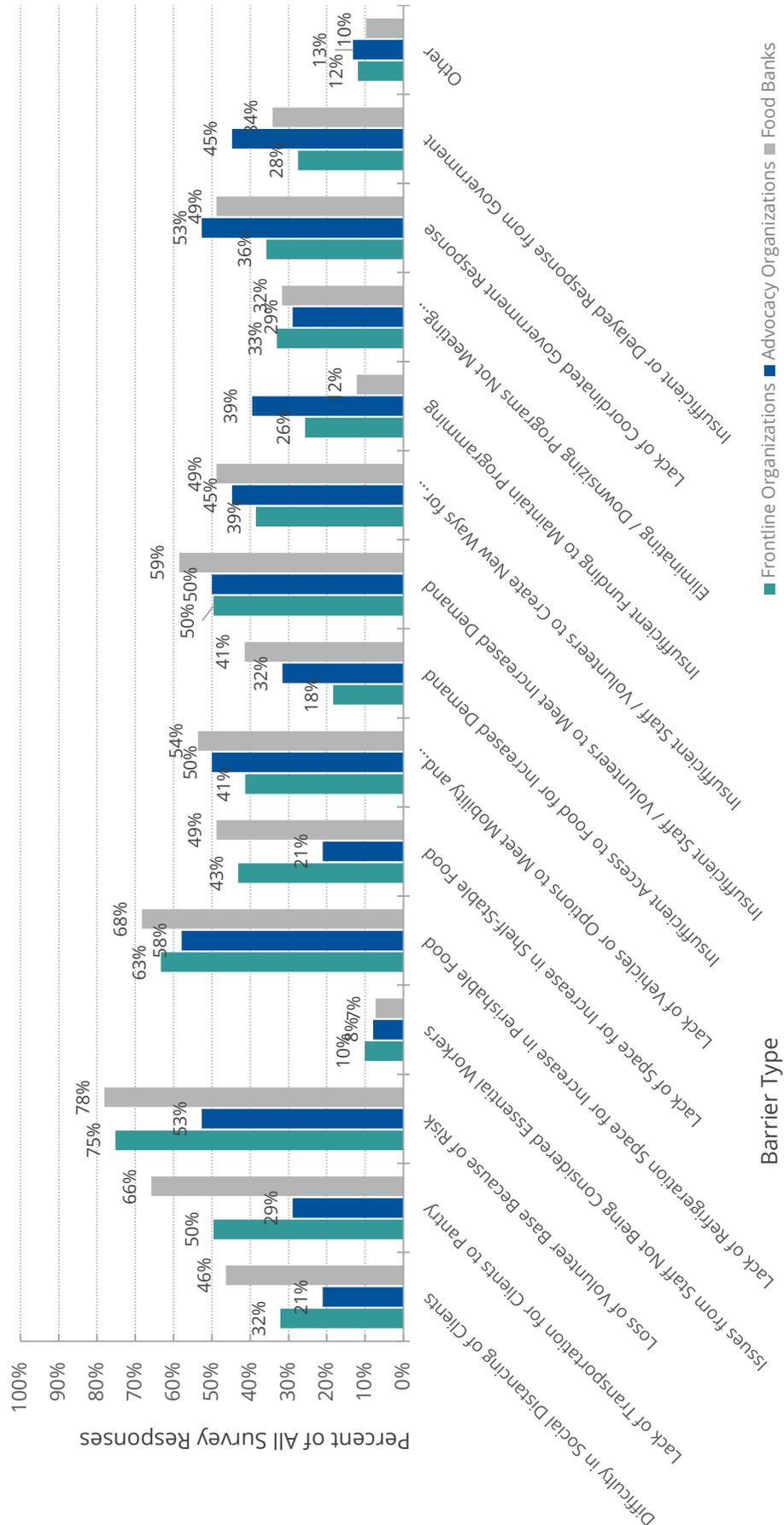
Q.2.4 Which of these additional barriers has your organization encountered during the pandemic?

In a multiple choice question we asked about the barriers the organizations faced during the pandemic. Loss of volunteer base because of COVID-19 exposure risk was selected most by respondent Frontline Organizations and Food Banks (75% and 78%, respectively). It was followed by lack of refrigeration space for increases in perishable foods (63% and 68%, respectively), lack of transportation for clients to get to the pantry (50% and 68%, respectively), and insufficient staff and volunteers to meet increased demand (50% and 59%, respectively). Respondent Advocacy Organizations had significantly lower percentages for all barrier options and slightly different responses with the highest rates, selecting lack of refrigeration space for increase in perishable foods (58%), loss of volunteer base because of risk (53%) and lack of coordinated government response (53%). Lack of vehicle or options to meet mobility and transportation needs and insufficient staff and volunteers to meet increased demand also had similar rates with 50% of Advocacy Organizations selecting these barriers.

The least important issue identified as a barrier was staff not being considered essential workers (all organizations selecting this option at less than 10%).

Figure A.15. Barriers Faced by Organizations During COVID-19

Many of the 'Other' responses elaborated on the existing multiple choice options. There were, however,



several other response that were included in the options provided. Some of the notable comments were:

“Need for more industry specific public health information, failure by Food Lifeline to share information quickly with partners, not enough emphasis on contingency planning, rush to do something rather than pause for brief reflection to ensure a more effective response.”

“Insufficient response, lack of transparency, and hostility from area food bank.”

“Many new people seeking food who do not know how to access or find resources, well-intentioned community members or programs setting up alternate, temporary food systems.”

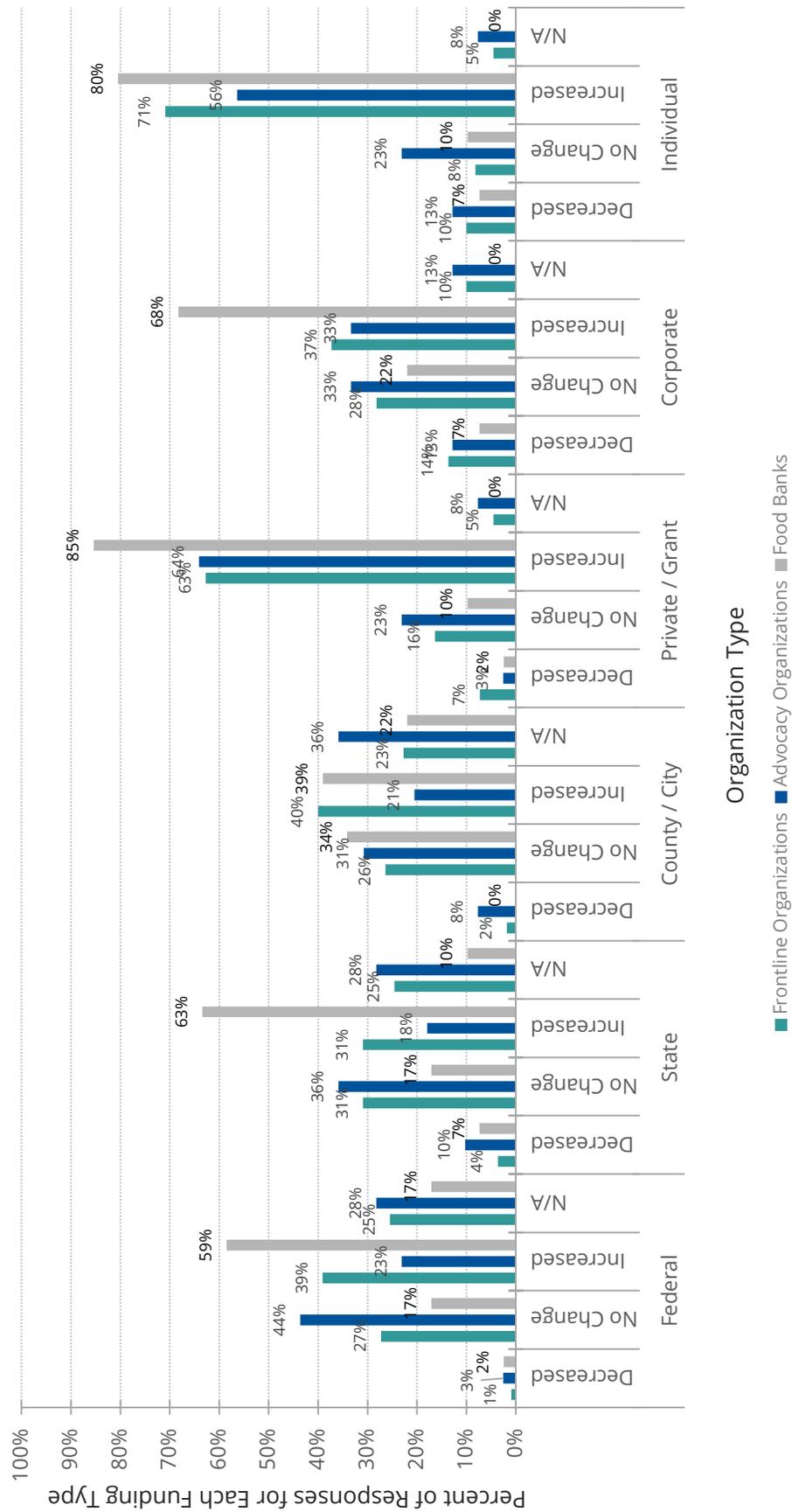
“We serve our meals to-go, but some people who are without homes have nowhere to eat and they have to eat outside in the elements.”

“Lack of ability to vet our recipients to find out true need.”

Q.2.7 How has the amount of funding for your organization changed?

All respondent organizations had an increase in private/grant funding and individual donations. Frontline Organizations overall had an increase in funding across all funding types, with the highest increases in private/grant funding (63%) and individual funding (71%). Advocacy Organizations had no change or does not apply for most funding types, outside of private/grant funding and individual donation funding (64% and 56%, respectively), which had significant increases. Similar to Frontline Organizations, Food Banks had an increase in funding across all funding types overall, with highest levels in private/grant funding (85%) and individual donation funding (80%).

Figure A.16 Funding Changes as a Result of COVID-19



Q.2.8 What additional support could networks, policymakers, or agencies provide to better support your organization's operations or mission?

The open-ended responses we received for this question can be divided into five categories: 1) financial support; 2) support facilitating partnerships and coordination with other organizations; 3) enhancing social safety net; 4) efforts that address the root causes of food insecurity; and 5) logistical and infrastructure support.

Responses that advocated for financial support were the most common—we grouped 30 into this category. Common themes from the responses included organizations wanting more unrestricted funding or longer time horizons. Responses include:

“Stop dictating how funds are used, stop setting unrealistic time restraints and making us use measurements that count weight more than actual results! Untie our hands.”

“Seeing more people with mental health issues; seeing more people that lost their jobs and are not able to find a new one due to the lack of education, experience, or skills; seeing more seniors experiencing isolation and loneliness; seeing more seniors that are considered home-bound due to self isolation.”

The second most frequent response was aid with facilitating partnerships or coordination with other organizations. There were 22 answers to the survey that echoed this theme. Examples include responses that indicated a desire to bring stakeholders together to share information and resources, and to develop coordination mechanisms.

Calls for a better social-safety net by the government were also common. There were 20 responses that advocated for local, statewide, or federal officials to do more. Although the answers identified different priorities, recurring themes were to increase SNAP benefits and funding, extend the Pandemic-Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) program or continue and expand unemployment benefits.

Foregrounding the root causes of food insecurity was the overarching theme for 17 of the responses. Examples of answers include calls to better address poverty, and provide adequate income or living wages:

“People need living incomes, ones that make it possible to provide both food and shelter,” and

“During times of crisis, people need additional income support. Emergency food networks should not be used to prop up an inadequate system of income support ... There also needs to be a way to assist people who are ineligible for programs due to their immigration status or other statuses which disqualify them for assistance.”

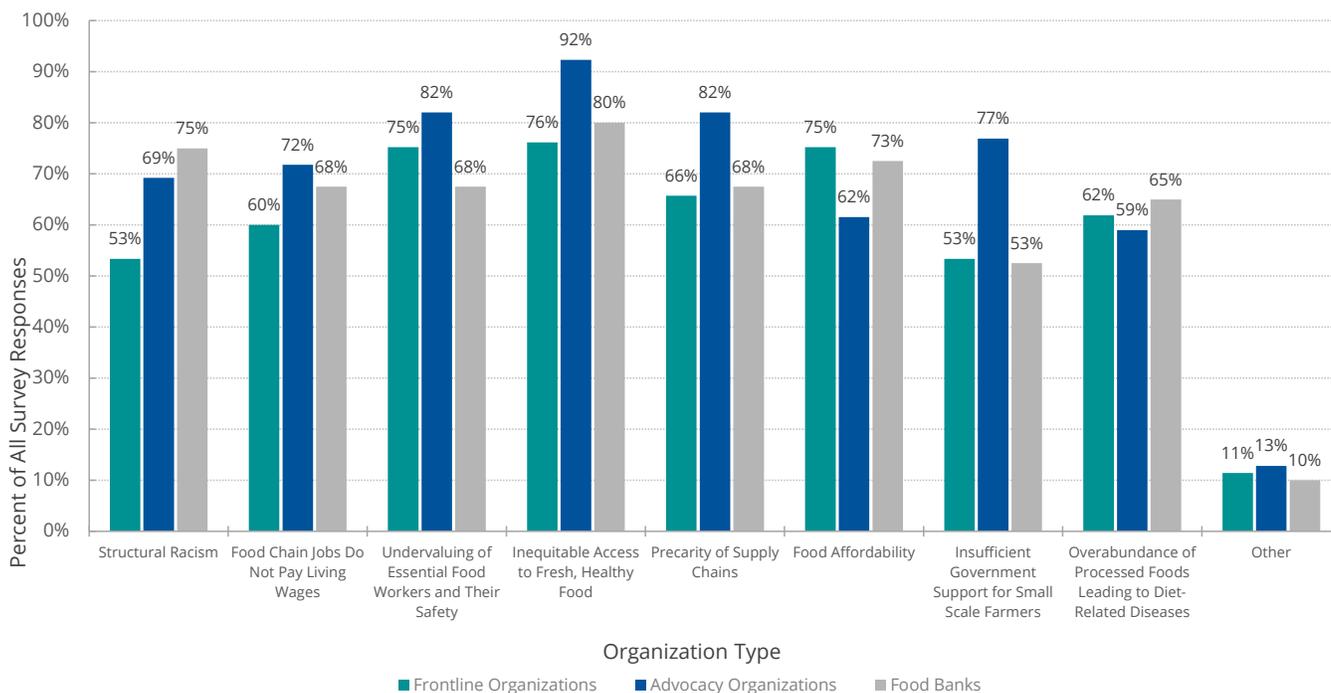
There were 4 organizations specifically asked for better approaches by the government programs, such as better clarity on health and safety guidelines and working with on-the-ground organizations before creating new programs. Finally, some organizations (n=5) mentioned that they do not require any additional support at the time.

Q.3.1 What problems or weaknesses in the food system has the COVID-19 pandemic revealed?

Every weakness listed as a potential response to this question in the survey was selected by 50 percent or more of all respondents. Over 75% of Frontline Organizations selected inequitable access to fresh food (76%), the undervaluing of essential food workers (75%), and food affordability (75%) as weaknesses. Structural racism and insufficient government support for small scale farmers were

selected at a lower, though still significant portion of Frontline Organizations (53%). Over 80% of Advocacy Organizations selected inequitable access to fresh food (92%), undervaluing of essential food workers (82%), and the precarity of supply chains (82%). Food affordability (62%) and overabundance of processed foods (59%) were the least selected. Over 55% of Food Banks selected inequitable access to fresh food (80%), structural racism (75%), and food affordability (73%). Insufficient government support for small farmers (53%) and overabundance of processes foods (65%) were the least selected.

Figure. A.17 Weaknesses in the Food System



In the 'Other' category, some organizations mentioned the increased awareness of the systemic issues: *"Covid-19 has not revealed any of these items, it has exacerbated them, but folks in the hunger relief world should know better."* And, *"Glad that more people are now aware of existing issues related to food."*

Waste in the food system was brought up, both in the sense of single-use plastic waste and in the form of wasted food by the food suppliers. There were several comments pointing out issues with the Federal Government's Farmers to Families food program, such as *"Farmers to Families box program highlighted that government does not truly understand the food banking system; raw product from farmers/suppliers would have been preferred over costly pre-boxed"* and *"Lack of client choice in Farmers to Families Food Bank program"*.

Most notable were mentions about the lack of a successful systemic approach to the pandemic, such as: *"Corporate influence, lack of accountability, reliance on individual-level solutions rather than systemic solutions, the inability of smaller organizations to have capacity to prioritize root cause work over direct service work, unrealistic community expectations"* and, *"Focus on charitable and government funding on emergency feeding only"*.

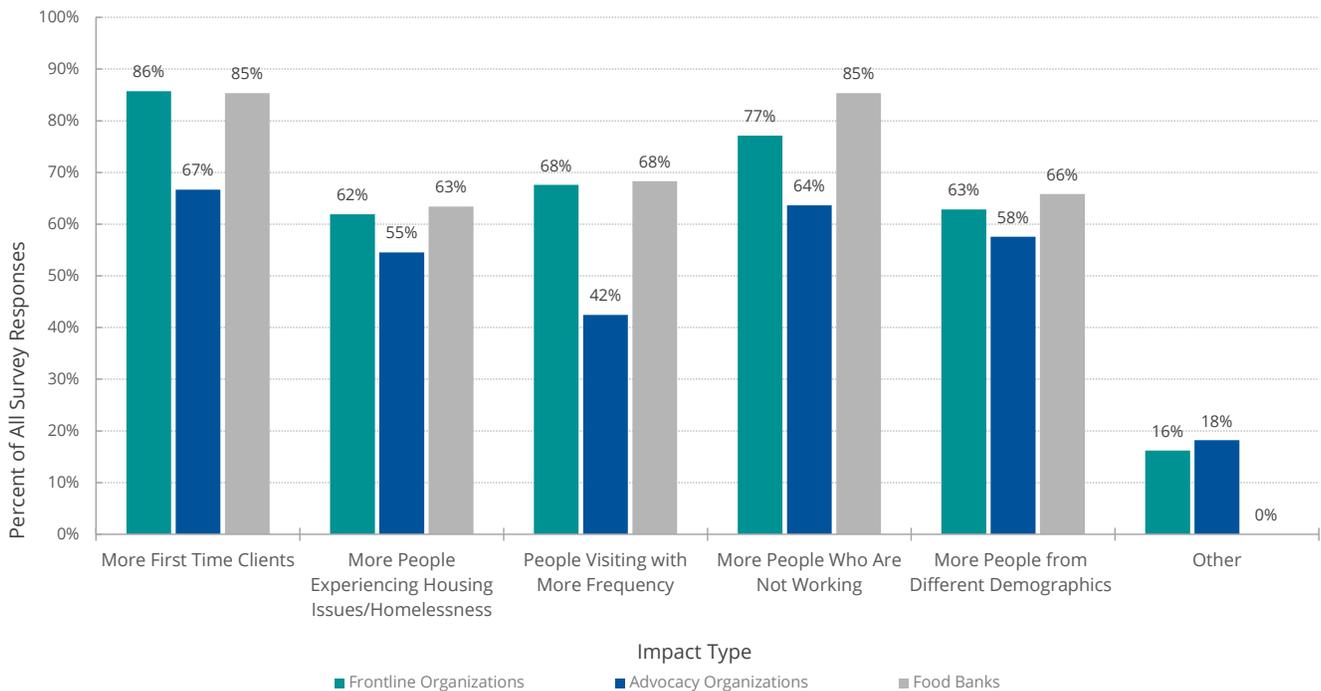
Q.3.2 How has COVID-19 affected the clients or population that your organization serves?

Respondent Frontline Organizations and Food Banks were seeing more first-time clients (86% and 85%, respectively) and more people who are not working (77% and 85%, respectively). Across the board, all respondents representing Food Banks and Frontline Organizations reported a high degree of observed impact in all possible responses, including first time clients, those not working, and an increase in clients experiencing housing issues, people visiting more frequently and more people representing a variety of demographics. Some of the organizations elaborated on the changes they have seen on their clients in the 'Other' section. Here are some of the notable responses:

"Seeing more immigrants who in past had several low wage jobs supporting the household. Now most have lost their jobs and are concerned about negative effects of applying for common financial supports that others in community access. Like SNAP and unemployment", and

"People are relying on our services who previously donated to our program".

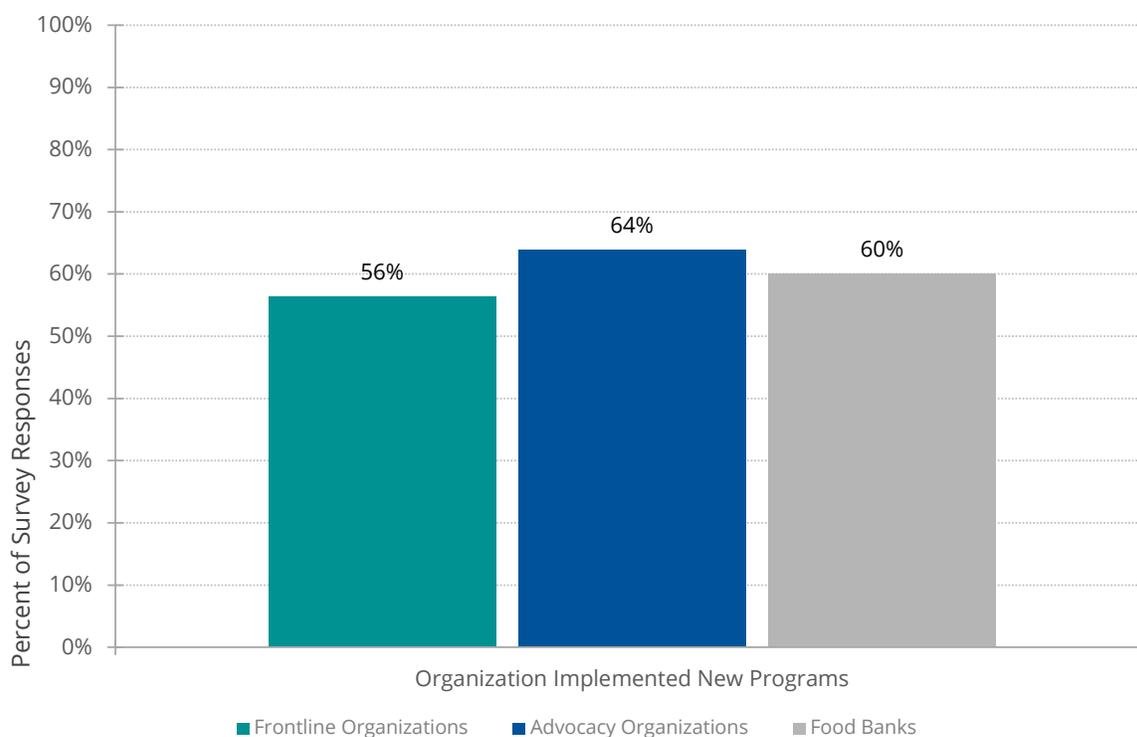
Figure A.18. Observed Impact of COVID-19 on Clients, by Impact Type



Q.3.3 Has your organization implemented any new programs to address issues revealed by COVID-19?

Most respondent organizations (over 50%) implemented some sort of new programming. Advocacy Organizations had the highest rates (64%), followed by Food Banks (60%) and Frontline Organizations (56%).

Figure A.19. Organizations Implemented New Programs



When all types of respondent hunger relief organizations are aggregated, the majority (n=89) of the open-ended responses could be grouped as logistical changes that organizations mentioned throughout this report. These changes came in the form of setting up deliveries to home, special populations, pop-up markets, removing screening processes, making infrastructure changes, mobile markets, creating to-go boxes and meals, etc. Forming new partnerships and/or strengthening existing ones with community organizations and/or governmental agencies (n=15) was another grouping.

Supporting local farms in various forms was also reported 14 times. These were in the form of sourcing from local farms, operating USDA's Farm to Families Food Box program, via CSA boxes and even in the form of helping local farmers to stay afloat. There were some other forms of financial assistance (n=5) of the community, whether in the form of direct financial support or rent relief.

New programs addressing root causes (n=16) were described as increasing advocacy efforts, anti-racism programs, supporting living wages, seed distribution programs. Some notable comments are as follows:

"Serving non-resident employees of our county's businesses. It may help us better understand which businesses have people working that still need assistance (the employer gives the employee a voucher with the business name on it). It supports the businesses that were unable to get the normal labor pool they desperately need so they can stay open and staffed. And, it helps the employee that wants to work, but may still need help. Most pantries are not open like a grocery store would be. They have limited hours and/or days. So, you could be working here, or traveling to and from your job here, and miss being served in your home county's pantry. Hopefully, this program helps us keep people fed while understanding where the most advocacy is needed for living wages."

"Pushed us to begin development of a food hub to promote equitable local food systems. We work to ensure participants are meaningfully part of decision-making process, especially when we lost funding and were candid we could not offer food like we did in the past. Moving from a charity to a justice model is important."

“NWTN Essential Gardens - we distributed free seeds and plants in May to encourage folks to grow food - over 300 families participated.”

Some other programs mentioned were virtual learning platforms, online stores, and photo-voice project collecting community's experience around impact of COVID-19 on food access.

Q.3.4 – What, if any, policy, practice, or programming changes will your organization implement to address systemic issues in the food system?

Though some respondent organizations (n=14) were not sure or not planning to make any changes, many organizations mentioned they will be doing one or more of the following changes:

Programmatic changes within their organizations (n=41) in order to serve their clients better. This may be in the form of delivery, increased capacity, ensuring equity by accessing harder-to-reach populations, offering culturally appropriate foods, and outreach to the community for better input or leadership (n=7) on how to plan their programs better for increased food access.

There were 16 organizations who mentioned they will be either starting or accelerating their internal anti-racism/DEI work within the organization. This took the form of either forming committees or recruiting diverse staff and/or board members.

Advocacy efforts (n=33) for either food access (n=18) or towards just food systems/in general (n=15) were mentioned. Advocacy for food access could be for the federal programs, such as SNAP/TANF/WIC/TEFAP, increase in local or state funding for better food access to healthy food or food for specific populations, such as in schools.

Focusing their efforts on enhancing or supporting local food systems (n=15) was another main theme of the changes planned by the organizations. This support was planned either in the form of organizing towards a better local food system or directly supporting the local food system by purchasing from local farmers or local food stores.

Finally, there were 11 organizations that mentioned they will be doing advocacy or internal changes towards ending hunger at its root causes, such as advocating for living wages, affordable housing, and anti-poverty measures. One organization mentioned they increased their full-time staff salaries to \$15/hour for example.

Q.3.5 – What changes should be made at the local and/or national policy level that may lead to more resilience in the food system for a similar future crisis?

Other than a small number (n=7) respondent organizations said none or not sure, many organizations mentioned one or more of the following categories: 1) policies that would address root causes of hunger, 2) policies that would improve direct food access programs, 3) policies regarding local food system and small-scale agriculture support, 4) policies that would support the existing Emergency Food System. In addition to these main categories, 5 organizations specifically mentioned healthy food access and 4 organizations emphasized community-led efforts towards policy solutions.

The first category regarding the root causes had 37 responses, 25 of them gave specific examples of implementing living wages, affordable housing, hazard pay, sick days, and other benefits for workers, as

well as universal basic income. Seven of these organizations commented that the emphasis should be shifted from the emergency food system towards addressing root causes.

The second category had 34 responses regarding how to improve direct food access programs, such as universal free meals in schools, creating pandemic versions of federal nutrition programs, and there were 23 direct shout-outs to SNAP program. These mentioned increasing SNAP benefits, increasing the reach by modifying eligibility requirements of the program, and technical improvements on the access points, such as online ordering.

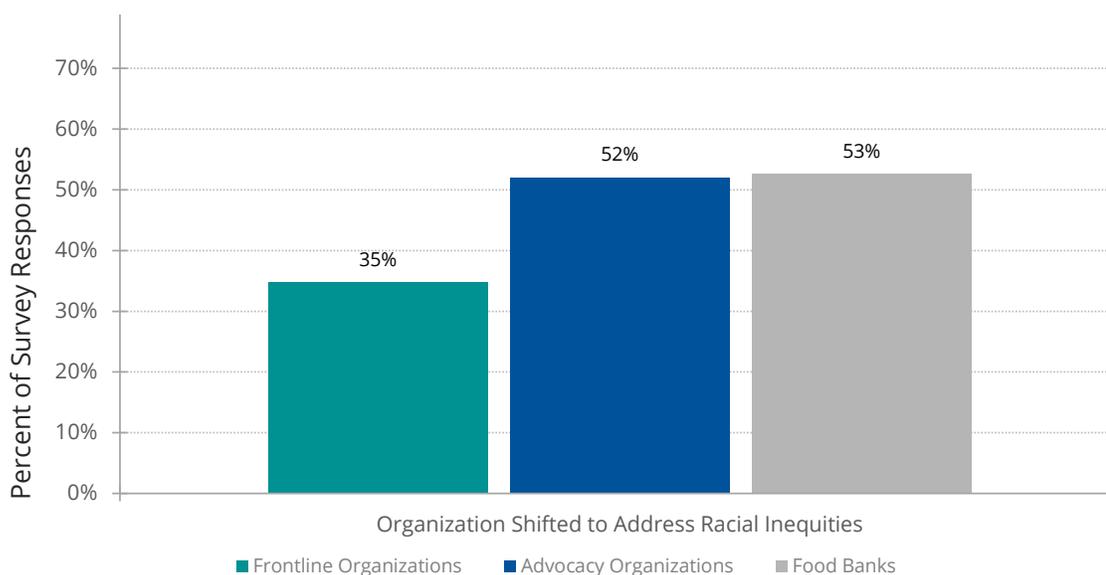
Next was the focus on local food systems and small-scale agriculture programs with 32 respondents. Specifically 19 respondents mentioned focusing on strengthening local food systems as a policy recommendation and 13 mentioned small-scale as well as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color farmers deserving of better support via local and national policies.

There were 25 organizations elaborated on different policies to strengthen the Emergency Food system, such as support for better coordination efforts, financial support for infrastructure, better TEFAP benefits, trainings for future preparedness, and having a national food stockpile that could be utilized in future disasters.

Q.3.6 Has your organization shifted to address racial inequities in the food system, which have been exacerbated by COVID-19?

Over fifty percent of respondent Advocacy Organizations and Food Banks said they shifted to address racial inequities, whereas thirty-five percent of Frontline Organizations said the same. Those that responded in the affirmative have elaborated in an open-ended follow-up question.

Figure A.20. Organizations Shifted to Address Racial Inequities



The open-ended responses followed four different tracks: 1) those that said they were focusing on internal equity within the organization; 2) organizations that said they were performing external equity work; 3) organizations that said they were performing community outreach; and 4) organizations that said they were *“already doing the working to address racial inequities.”*

The first and second categories both had 19 responses. Internal equity work captures the responses that organizations were casting their gaze inwards. Responses that were grouped in this category include ones that indicated organizations were building task forces around inequities and anti-racism, or diversity and equity committees. External efforts included advocacy work or moving to address cultural food needs and the appropriateness of foods.

There were 11 responses that suggested organizations were focused on community outreach. These included reaching out to different demographics (immigrants or at-risk families), inviting more voices into the work, or engaging with different community groups.

There were 10 answers from organizations that indicated they were already focused on racial inequities in the food system. *"We were addressing racial inequities in the food system before COVID,"* one organization said. *"We work to increase supply and availability of healthy foods in a community with no grocery store. We do this through food distributions, urban farming, low-cost farm stands, and are now working to develop a community food hub."*

Finally, there were answers that could not be easily categorized. These included responses such as the following:

- *"Beginning fruit & vegetable deliveries in service gap areas with high percent POC populations."*
- *"Spanish speakers available, Black Lives Matter signage, voter and census support."*
- *"Prioritized directing more resources to minority neighborhoods and food deserts."*

Q.3.7 Is there anything else that your organization would like to share about COVID-19 and the future of the food system?

There were a wide range of responses to this open-ended prompt. Most respondents addressed one of three areas: 1) the root causes of food insecurity; 2) emergency food provision; or 3) agriculture.

The root causes of food insecurity category captured responses that advocated for stakeholders to address poverty, increase the resiliency and sustainability of the food system, or work to understand and upend the racially biased system. There were 21 answers that could be grouped along these lines. The discussion around emergency food provision centered on items such as improving coordination and communication between national organizations and local counterparts or shifting narratives around hunger and food insecurity. There were 15 responses that focused on these or similar issues.

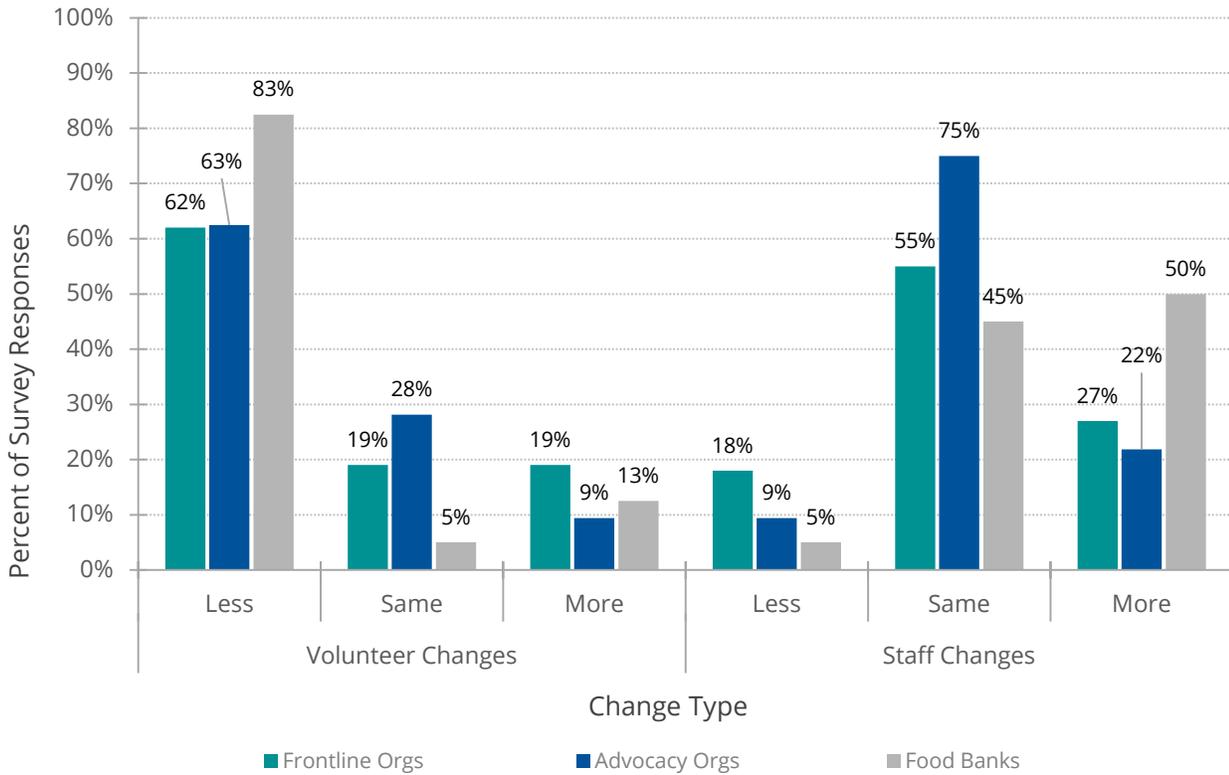
"We've become acutely aware of the misunderstandings people in our state have about hunger, the emergency food system, and federal nutrition programs even amongst those in the food system," one wrote. *"We believe that aside from creating policy and systems that are more resilient to events such as COVID, education and loud conversations about these programs and issues at large is super important year-round."*

The final category focused on issues around agriculture, farming and how food is produced. Examples of answers here included support for local and small farmers, shifting away from globalized food systems to more local ones, and addressing land loss or land acquisition concerns. There were 12 answers that could be grouped into this category.

Q.4.1 and Q.4.2 Has your organization experienced a change in the number of volunteers or staff as a result of COVID-19?

All respondent organization types had a decrease in volunteers, with Food Banks having the largest decrease in volunteers, falling by 83%. Across organizations staff levels stayed about the same, however, 50% of Food Banks also showed an increase in staff.

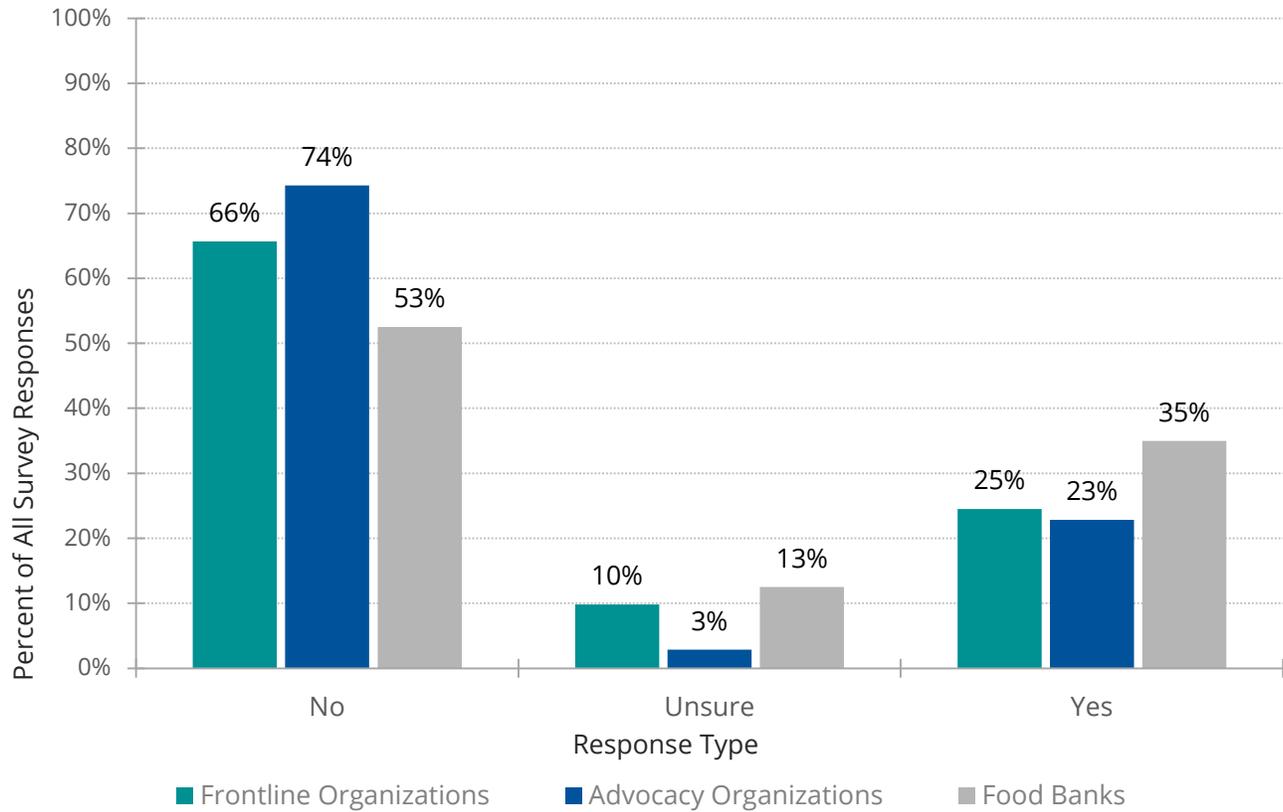
Figure. A.21. Changes in the Amount of Volunteers/Staff



Q.4.3 Have any staff members or volunteers contracted COVID-19?

Generally, respondent organizations had less than 50% of staff and volunteers contracting COVID-19, with Food Banks having the highest rates at 35%.

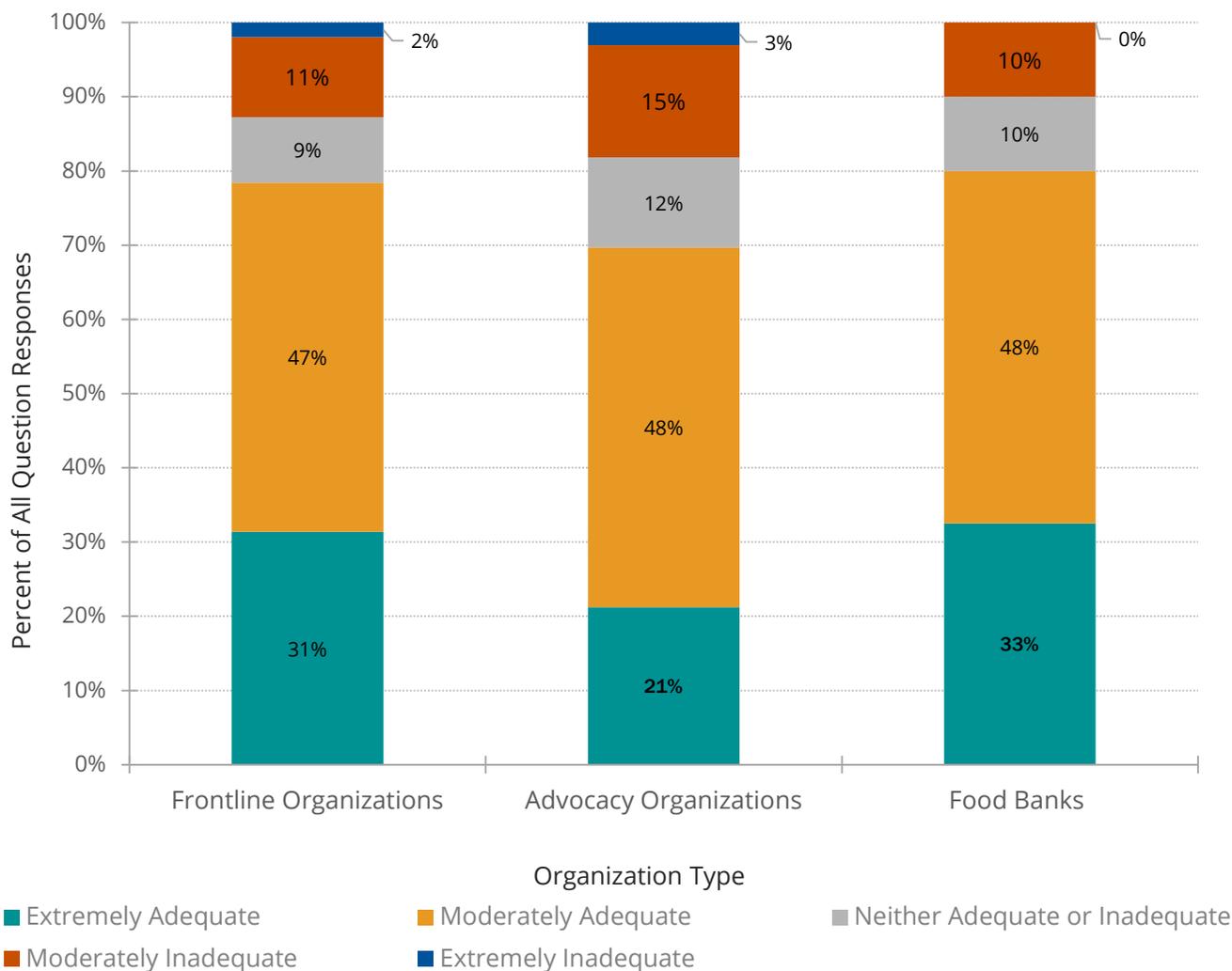
Figure. A.22. Staff or Volunteers Contracted COVID-19



Q.4.4 Has your organization had adequate access to PPE and health monitoring items, such as masks, gloves, thermometers, etc.?

Overwhelmingly, respondent organizations had some sort of access to PPE, with 78% of Frontline Organizations, 69% of Advocacy Organizations, and 81 percent of Food Banks indicating extremely or moderately adequate access.

Figure A.23. HRO's Access to PPE



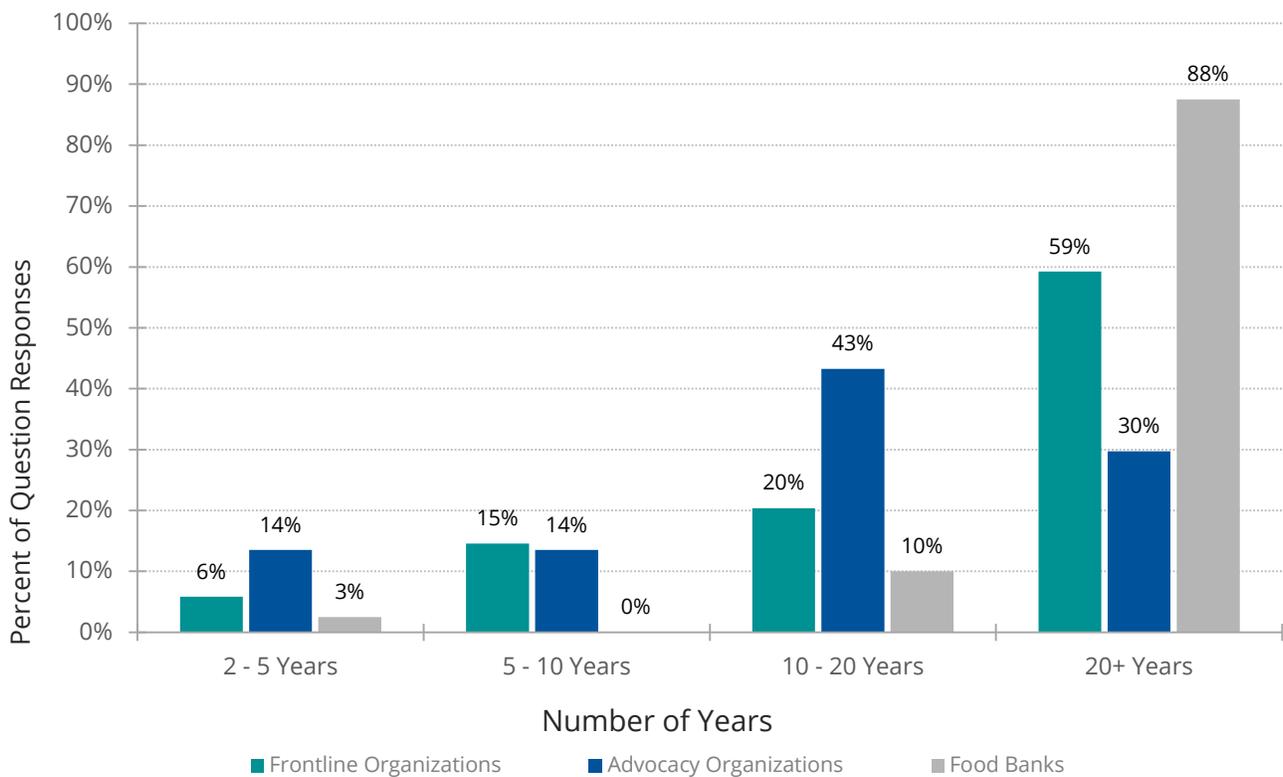
Q.4.5 How is your organization getting PPE (gloves, masks, thermometers, etc.)?

Respondent organizations described four primary ways for accessing PPE: 1) purchasing; 2) donations; 3) government; and 4) through other non-profits or Food Banks. Direct purchase (122) and donations (71) were the most common.

Q.5.1 How long has your organization been in operation?

Almost all respondent organizations in the survey had been operating for at least 10 years, with most Frontline Organizations and Food Banks have been in operation for over 20 years (59% and 88%, respectively). Only 3% of Food Banks have been in operation for less than 10 years. Most Advocacy Organizations have been in operation for at least 10 years, with 43% operating for 10 to 20 years and 30% for over 20 years.

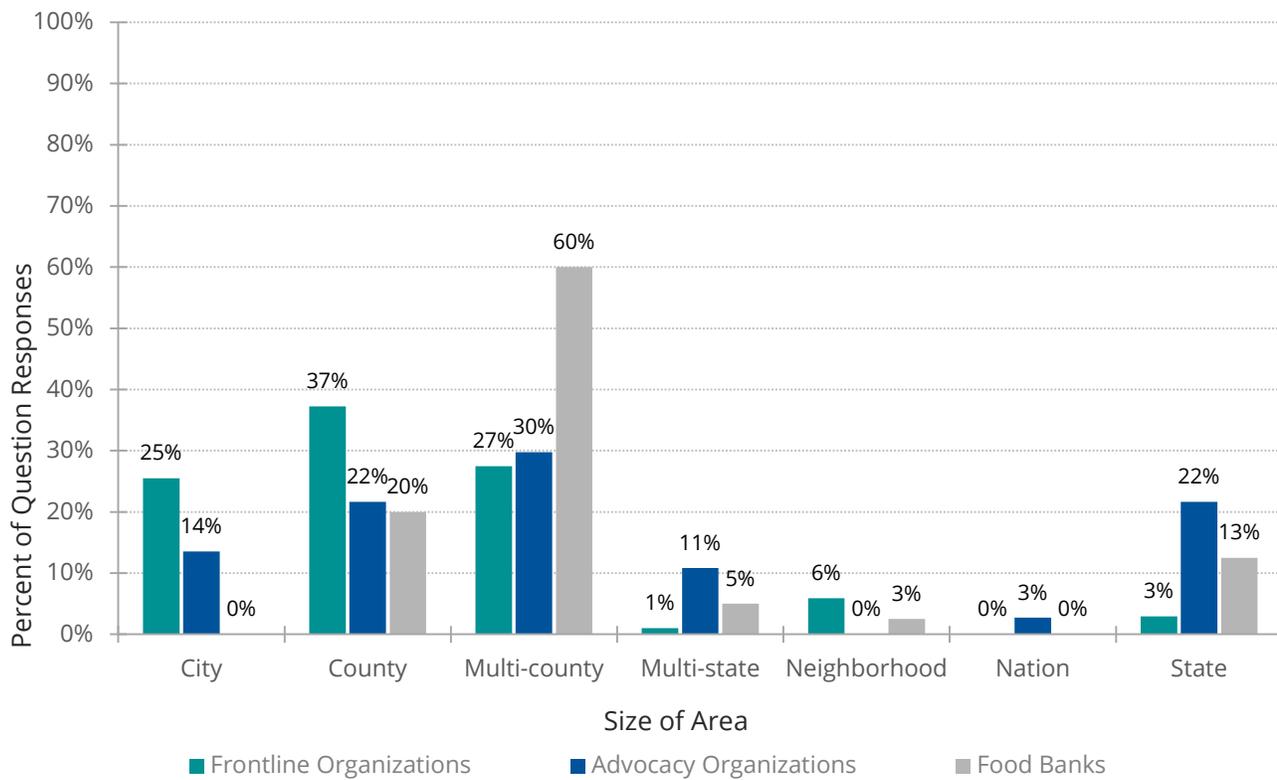
Figure A.24. Time Organization Has Been in Operation



Q.5.2 What is the geographical service area of your organization?

All respondent organizations had mainly regional or local service areas. Food Banks overwhelmingly serve a county or multi-county area (20% and 60%, respectively), whereas Frontline Organizations operate at the city, county, and multi-county level (25%, 37%, and 27% respectively). Advocacy Organizations were represented in almost all geographical service areas, with most organizations being at a regional level (22% at county, 30% at multi-county, and 22% at state levels).

Figure A.25. Organization Geographical Service Area



Q.5.3 Where is your organization, main office, or headquarters located? (Please specify city/county and state)?

Organizations from 39 states participated in the survey. States of Minnesota, New York, North Carolina, and California were heavily represented.

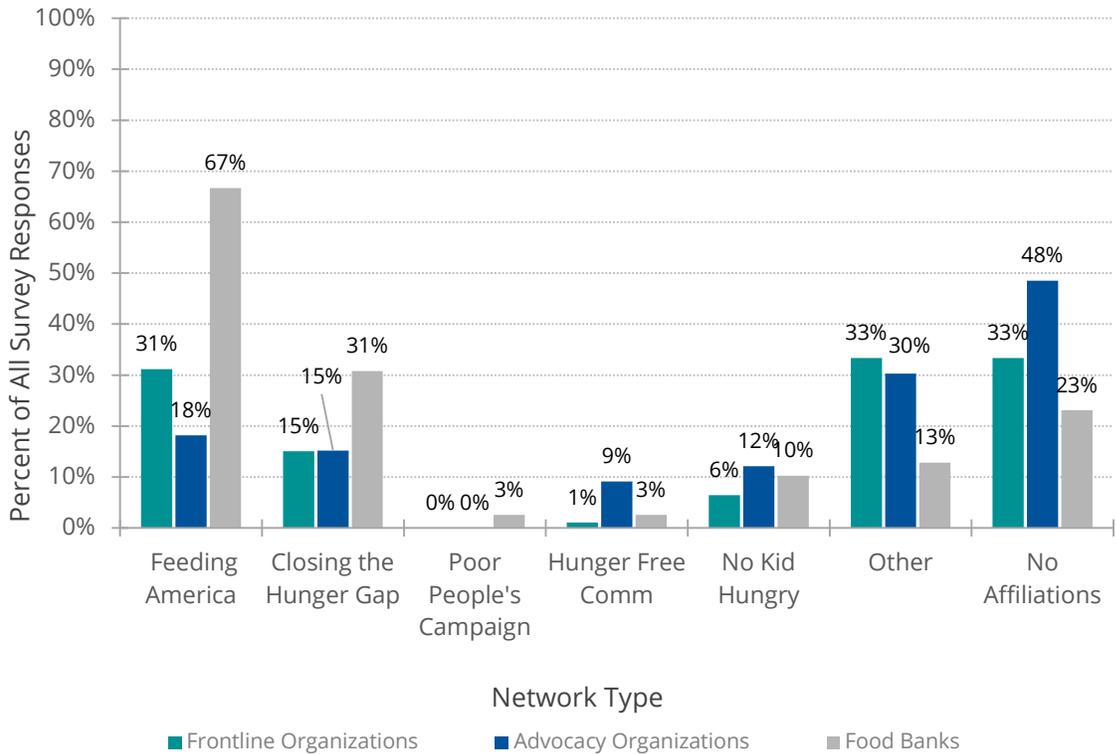
Table A.1. States at which Organization offices and/or headquarters are located

State	#	State	#	State	#	State	#
AZ	4	KY	2	ND	1	PA	1
CA	13	LA	1	NE	1	SC	1
CO	1	MA	7	NH	2	TN	1
CT	3	MD	2	NJ	1	TX	8
FL	6	ME	1	NM	2	VA	7
GA	2	MI	8	NV	1	VT	1
HI	1	MN	22	NY	19	WA	9
ID	1	MO	3	OH	4	WI	1
IL	1	MS	1	OK	1	WV	1
IN	3	NC	18	OR	7		

Q.5.4 – Is your organization part of a larger network?

Respondent Frontline Organizations do not generally seem to belong to larger networks, with only 31% indicating they are a part of Feeding America and 33% saying they have no affiliation. However, 33% did indicate other and choose to write in responses. Advocacy Organizations also generally did not belong to larger networks, with almost half (48%) indicating no affiliation. However, 18% are in the Feeding America network, 15% are part of the Closing the Hunger Gap network, and 30% indicated 'Other.' Food Banks overwhelmingly belong to larger networks, with two-thirds (67%) indicating they are a part of Feeding America and another 31% saying they belong to Closing the Hunger Gap. Close to one-fourth indicated they had no affiliation.

Figure A.26. Organizations Belong to Larger Networks

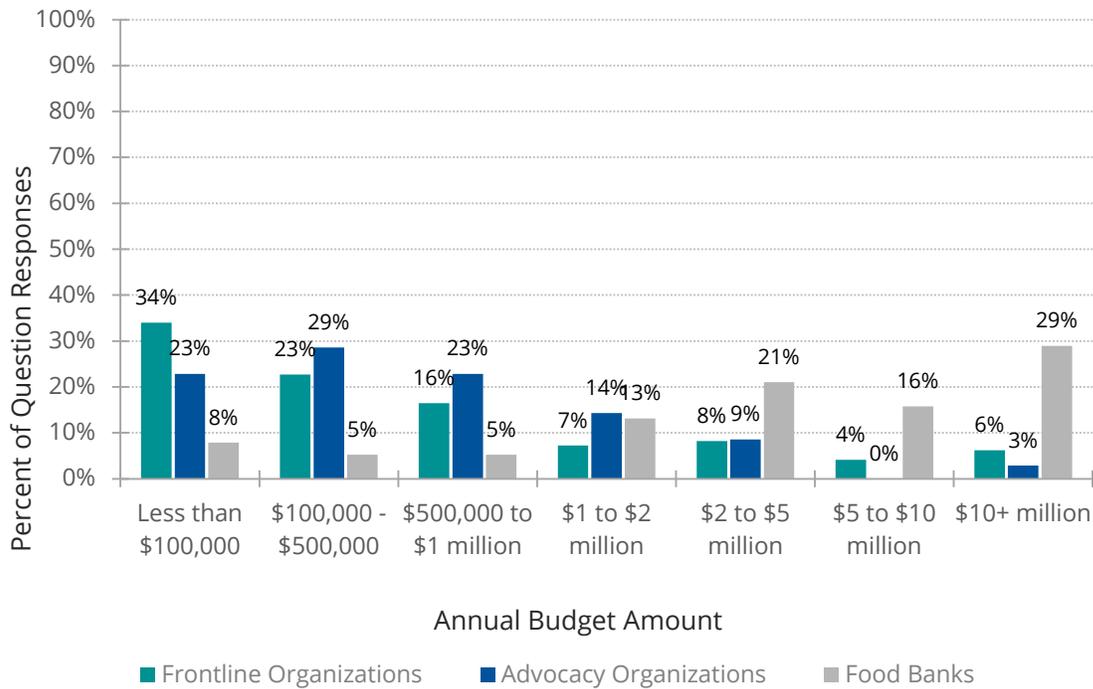


In the 'Other' category, organizations named specific local, regional, or national networks they either belong to or partner with, some examples are Second Harvest Food Bank, Meals on Wheels, and US Food Sovereignty Alliance. There was a notable comment as follows: *"This question reveals an opportunity- there is not a nationwide network of direct service providers. I used to work in aging, and we were connected with MOWAA and NANASP. Feeding America is focused on Food Banks."*

Q.5.5 What was the average operating budget of your organization before COVID-19?

Operating budgets varied across respondent organization types. The majority of frontline and Advocacy Organizations have operating budgets of less than \$1 million (73% and 75%, respectively). Over one-third of Frontline Organizations (34%) have even smaller budgets of less than \$100,000. In comparison, the majority of Food Banks had budgets in the \$2 to \$10 million range (66%).

Figure A.27. Average Operating Budget



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