



People of faith working
to end hunger by addressing
the root causes of poverty

www.hungernetohio.com

Report prepared by:
Deacon Nick Bates, J.D., M.T.S
April 23, 2020

SOCIAL MINISTRY IN A TIME OF COVID-19

SUMMARY

The faith community adapts in creative ways to serve their hungry neighbor during the pandemic. Faith leaders and volunteers seek state and federal investments, leadership, and plans to move forward in a safe manner.

Ohio must first respond to the public health crisis in front of us by following the advice and direction of public health experts. With equal intensity, public officials must prioritize the economic crisis for families struggling to make ends meet. If all are in this together, and committed to finding solutions to hunger and poverty, we will not only get through this, but be stronger on the other side.

OVERVIEW OF SURVEY

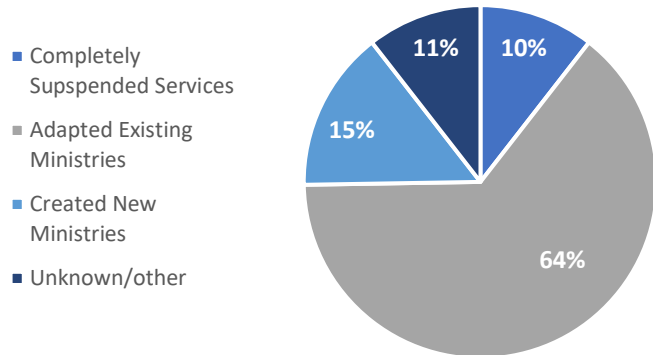
The Hunger Network in Ohio (HNO) conducted a survey to identify the current attitudes and needs of social ministry organizations across Ohio. Social ministries include the food pantries, produce giveaways, community meals, clothing closets, material assistance, and other services that faith communities provide to the neighborhood. Most of these ministries are minimally staffed and operate on volunteers. These volunteers are often the front lines in the struggle for economic security for all Ohioans. This survey includes input from over 100 faith communities that provide direct service to their communities, representing voices from about 1 in 3 of Ohio's counties. People of faith remained committed to serving their neighbor, but our survey results indicate growing anxiety among volunteers, faith leaders and staff. Data collection occurred from April 8th to April 21st.

"Truly I tell you, whatever
you did for one of the
least of these brothers
and sisters of mine, you
did for me.'
~ Matthew 25:40

ADAPTATION TO MEET COMMUNITY NEEDS:

Social ministry organizations are adapting their ministries to continue serving their neighbor. In the survey, nearly 2/3 of respondents indicated that they have adapted their existing social ministries to comply with current social distancing requirements, and stay-at-home orders. About 15% of respondents indicated they were able to expand ministries to do something new as the needs of the community change. Some of the highlights of service adaptation and new ministries include:

How have social ministries adapted



Curbside Food Distribution: The most common adaptation. Many social ministry food pantries work with the Ohio Association of Foodbanks and followed their leadership for curbside, no touch food pick-up.

Carry Out Meals: Convert community meals into carry-out options, but struggle with packaging needed to do this long-term and in an environmentally sound way.

Recruiting Younger Volunteers: Many social ministry providers have told their traditional volunteers – who tend to be older – to stay home and recruited younger volunteers.

Provide Cash/Gift Cards: A few social ministry providers replaced volunteers with donations of cash or gift cards to social service providers like shelters. Most faith communities report that they have less cash now to donate.

Create Internet Hot-spots in Church Parking Lots: As students and parents struggle with at-home internet access, a few churches have figured out how to offer internet to members of their community.

Assistance by Appointment Only: Some social ministries have limited services only to those who are able to make an appointment in advance for specific needs.

Food/Necessity Pick-up: Social ministry providers provide community members assistance with grocery store trips (both offering rides and including items in their own pick-ups). There continue to be barriers to using SNAP/EBT cards with online orders, so social ministry volunteers are shopping for individuals in at-risk demographics.

TOP SHORT-TERM NEEDS:

Social ministries require state and federal leadership and investment into communities that are struggling to make ends meet.

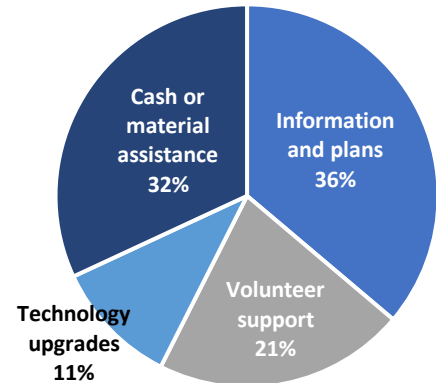
Information and Plans: 39% of respondents indicate that they are still waiting for a clear plan to move forward. They want to know best practices and protocols for social distancing and to prevent the spread of disease during service delivery, how to help community members access public benefits in the most effective and efficient way possible, and the federal leadership and investments needed in our communities.

Cash and Material Assistance: 34% of respondents listed the need for cash or material assistance as their top immediate need. Many social ministries do in-gatherings of material assistance (toiletries, feminine hygiene, cleaning supplies, etc.) on Sunday mornings, but cannot do that right now. As many community meal programs shift to carry out meals, congregations want affordable ways to offer healthy meal options in reusable containers. Also, one provider mentioned that they suspended a ministry of offering shower and laundry services to homeless individuals.

Volunteer Support: Social ministries are looking for three things in their volunteer recruitment and preparation right now. First, they need younger volunteers. Many social ministries have recruited college and high school students to help fill their need while sending their traditional volunteers (who tend to be older) home. However, as students begin to re-enter the economy or on-site education, they will not be able to make the same level of commitment as they are now. Our aging volunteer numbers are a signal of a larger issue over the next 10-15 years that faith leaders and policymakers need to take seriously. Second, social ministries need masks, gloves, and cleaning materials. Service ministries do not have the supplies needed to provide services safely. Finally, these volunteers need training right now on how to properly clean, provide services with social distancing in place, because this is the new normal of our ministries.

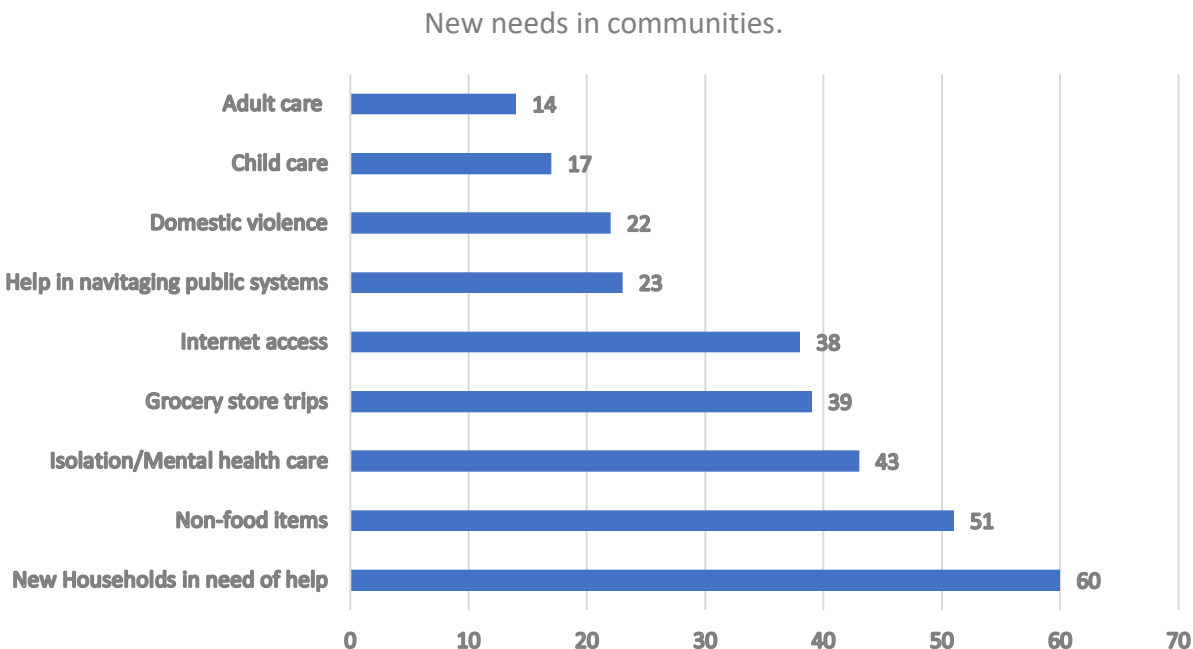
Technology upgrades: As social services are provided with no touch policies, new technology is needed to extend wi-fi into parking lots, additional tablets for volunteers to use by the cars for processing those who come through and much more. This is in addition to families who cannot access the internet in their home for education or employment purposes.

What are your current needs?



CHANGING NEEDS IN OHIO:

Poverty was already a major crisis in our communities, the COVID-19 crisis just made it a whole lot worse.



Poverty is not static. Families cycle in and out of poverty every day and this crisis pushed everyone in at once. In 2018 data, 31% of Ohio households didn't earn enough to make ends meet – let alone have the resources to save for an economic downturn. These households, earning less than 200% of the federal poverty level, and others are now seeking emergency assistance¹. Without state and federal investments directly into these households, it will take years to recover.

The search for non-food items including diapers, toilet paper, cleaning supplies, and other essentials is even more difficult for households that are struggling with poverty. Households with children, work, at-home schooling, and other obligations do not have the time or capacity to search many stores to find the essentials. Anecdotal evidence also suggests that the cheaper brands of items disappear first on essential items, leaving the more costly items to families who cannot afford to be their first.

Social ministries want to identify ways to support the mental health of congregational members as well. They report coordinating phone trees, letter writing, and activity packs for children. However, these plans are very limited in scope and are not a replacement for a strong mental health response.

¹ Kaiser Family Foundation 2018 data: <https://www.kff.org/other/state-indicator/population-up-to-200-fpl/?currentTimeframe=0&sortModel=%7B%22colId%22:%22Under%20200%25%22,%22sort%22:%22asc%22%7D>

POLICY SOLUTIONS: *Need is going up*

As need goes up, social ministry organizations identify policy solutions to the current economic crisis. 75% of our respondents indicate that they have seen some (50%) or dramatic (25%) increase in the need in their communities.

The reality is the faith community cannot do this alone – we need a public commitment toward public health and economic security for all. Our policy recommendations are divided into our four policy priority areas.

- **Feed People Today**

Foodbank investment: Ohio needs to adopt policies that will invest an additional \$25 million into our food bank network to guarantee that the need of hungry Ohioans is met. While the Governor's initial investment of \$5 million goes a long way, it doesn't go nearly far enough.

Expand SNAP: SNAP is the most important investment to curb hunger in Ohio and across the country. HNO encourages congress to boost SNAP's maximum benefit by 15% and reduce administrative barriers that cause people difficulty in accessing their benefits or lose them prematurely.

Training: Many social ministry organizations are staffed by volunteers and will need straight forward training on how to prevent the spread of disease and serve their community. We encourage the state to work with social service providers in developing effective training materials and protocols for congregations and social service agencies.

- **Educate to End Hunger**

High Speed Internet: From Pre-k through higher ed, Ohio and the nation need to continue to guarantee that all students have access to equitable and adequate education. This crisis highlights that many families do not have the same access to technology that others have. To improve educational access, we must close the digital divide so all students and teachers, regardless of zip code, have access to high speed internet and appropriate technology. Our nation brought electricity to rural areas under the New Deal. We should do it again with high speed internet.

Prevent Budget Cuts: Ohioans need all options on the table. Education is a major component of Ohio's budget and with the impending budget crisis at the state level, Congress needs to invest \$500 billion into state and local public services.

Likewise, Ohio should re-consider certain tax policies – such as the House passed reforms to the LLC loophole – to generate revenue needed to adopt a balanced approach to balancing our state budget.

- **Create an Economy that Works for All**

Unemployment Compensation: Ohio needs an unemployment compensation system that will continue to provide benefits to 1099/gig workers and low-wage earners in our economy. Regardless of the crisis, unemployment compensation is essential for households between jobs.

Paid Sick and Family Care Leave: Many Ohioans continue to work when they are sick or send their kids to school when they are sick, because the parents cannot afford to take time off. Ohio should adopt a paid sick leave policy that will minimize the spread of all disease. Paid family care leave should also be adopted to lift up the care for children or parents during crucial and emotional points in life. As Ohio begins to re-open, many Ohioans will be unable to return to work immediately because they must continue to care for other family members.

- **Build Healthy Homes and Communities**

Eviction Assistance: Ohio and the nation must also prioritize rental assistance to help people who will have three months of rent due this summer or next fall. Many landlords and communities have suspended evictions in the short-term, but that money will still be due. The federal CARES Act did not go far enough to supplement the income of out-of-work Ohioans to cover two or three months worth of rent². Congress should invest \$100 billion into helping families stay in their homes through emergency rental assistance.

Adopt a racial equity assessment so that all Ohioans are considered: The historic legacy and current realities of racism continue to be a plague on the health of communities of color. Just like with infant mortality and other health metrics³, COVID-19 is hitting racial minority communities the hardest.⁴ We need to adapt a racial equity lens for this current crisis, and for future legislation, and invest the needed resources to achieve healthcare equality.

Expanded testing and healthcare options: Despite our best efforts to not overwhelm Ohio's hospital system during the initial wave, many Ohioans still lack access to basic healthcare. The lack of healthcare providers in rural areas

² <https://www.ohiopovertylawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/OPLC-rental-assistance-report-042220-Final.pdf>

³ https://odh.ohio.gov/wps/wcm/connect/gov/1e495f43-ffe2-4aaf-a2fd-445061a3c9d7/ODH+News+Release--+2018+Ohio+Infant+Mortality+Report.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CONVERT_TO=url&CACHEID=ROOTWORKSPACE.Z18_M1HGGIK0N0J_000QO9DDDDM3000-1e495f43-ffe2-4aaf-a2fd-445061a3c9d7-n1-9gkZ

⁴ <https://www.wcpo.com/news/coronavirus/dewine-covid-19-disproportionately-impacting-minorities-in-ohio>

and accessibility issues in urban communities leads many Ohioans to not have access to regular care. Ohio should invest in health service providers in new communities and invest in cultural competency to improve public health.

CONCLUSION: *Let's invest in our communities now*

These policy recommendations are only the beginning of what social ministry leaders see as our most pressing needs right now. As people of faith, social ministry organizations report that their volunteers maintain their positive attitudes (42%), while expressing deep concern about the longevity of their ability to provide ministry to the community. A growing number of social ministry organizations report feelings of concern (20%) and burnout (20%). If these volunteers burn out, run out of resources, or are unable to serve, Ohio will see a dramatic increase in households unable to escape the clutches of long-term poverty.

As Ohio begins to re-open the economy on May 1st, we cannot think this is over. In addition to the ongoing health crisis that will likely last into 2021, the economic fallout of this crisis will continue for years. Ohio and our nation need to prioritize building up resilient communities that can handle economic interruptions caused by a pandemic or a business closure. We need to invest in the people and communities that are struggling with uncertainty and determination to move forward.

The Hunger Network in Ohio is a faith-based, non-profit advocacy group that works to end hunger by addressing the root causes of poverty. We are grateful for our ecumenical partners throughout Ohio including the three Synods of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), the two United Methodist Church Conferences, the two Episcopal Church Dioceses, the Ohio Conference of the United Church of Christ, and our other partners.

We are grateful for the financial support from ELCA World Hunger, our Board of Directors, our judicatory partners, and the countless number of social ministry volunteers, staff, and other service providers in our community that continue to tirelessly seek to feed the world.

www.hungernetohio.com

A faith-based network that works to end hunger by addressing the root causes of poverty