

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Media Inquiries:

Joint Information Center
eoc.jic@baltimorecity.gov

443-401-2902



Bernard C. "Jack" Young
Mayor

Bernard C. "Jack" Young

Mayor,
City of Baltimore
250 City Hall • Baltimore, Maryland 21202 • 410-
396-3835

PRESS RELEASE

Mayor Bernard C. "Jack" Young Announces Expanded, Comprehensive COVID-19 Emergency Food Strategy in Response to Growing Need

City moves to minimize hunger in Baltimore during pandemic with large-scale food distribution hub, grocery supplements, SNAP expansion and community and urban farm grants

BALTIMORE, MD.—Today, Mayor Bernard C. "Jack" Young announced an expanded emergency food response to the coronavirus pandemic that significantly increases current levels of food assistance; includes food supplements across age groups and geographic areas; offers residents food and grocery choice; factors in stay-at-home and social distancing requirements; and connects with historically underserved residents often overlooked by mass food distribution channels.

In the first month of its emergency response, the city distributed 700,000 meals and nearly 2,000 grocery boxes. The expanded COVID-19 Emergency Food Strategy will grow that reach over the next two months by providing a projected 2.5 million meals, 70,000 grocery boxes and up to 12,000 household grocery supplements. The strategy also includes community group and urban agriculture grants.

"As soon as we began distributing meals back in March, it was clear we had to ramp up our efforts," said Mayor Young. "We now have a strategy that scales our effort across all fronts to meet what we know is a critical need among our most vulnerable residents."

The COVID-19 Emergency Food Strategy responds to the escalating need for food since the city launched its emergency meal distribution effort in mid-March. Going into the pandemic, 70 percent of Baltimore City Public Schools students participated in school lunch and 28 percent of residents participated in the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). From the outset need was great. As economic hardship deepened so did the demand for food. In response, a cross-agency team led by the Department of Planning and the Mayor's Office of Children & Family Success developed a 60-day forward view of food need. The team projects that in two months, at least one in three Baltimore residents will require food assistance.

“The food strategy from Day One has been: To create, in a city with high concentrations of poverty and residents who are excluded from mainstream systems of support, an emergency food system where no one in Baltimore goes hungry during the pandemic—while honoring personal dignity and agency in the process,” says Tisha Edwards, Executive Director, Mayor’s Office of Children & Family Success. “The strategy is community-driven, informed by data and maximizes collective impact through a far-reaching network of support. We are all working to feed Baltimore.”

The COVID-19 Emergency Food Strategy has four core elements:

- 1. Meal distribution:** The city will continue daily meals for youth and families and add community sites as needed. It will also scale up meal delivery to older adults with expanded Meals on Wheels and Salvation Army partnerships. The city currently serves 800 older adult meals/mo. It will grow that to 6,400 meals/mo. in May and up to 8-9,000/mo. in June.
- 2. Food distribution:** The city will operationalize a large-scale, centralized food hub for assembly and distribution of grocery boxes purchased from the Maryland Food Bank. Distribution will begin this month with an existing inventory of 10,000 boxes. The goal is to distribute an additional 30,000 boxes/mo. in May and June, making for a total distribution of 70,000 boxes. The city is also partnering with the Fund for Educational Excellence to deploy money donated by 11 local corporations to administer small grants to community organizations to reach children and seniors in high-need neighborhoods.
- 3. Food retail:** The city will work to expand SNAP accessibility and eligibility. For those who typically don’t benefit from government programs—undocumented residents, opportunity youth, returning citizens and individuals experiencing homelessness—the city is launching a grocery supplement for an initial 3-5,000 households, which it will strive to grow to 6-12,000 households by June. Both supplemental grocery benefits maximize resident access and choice.
- 4. Urban agriculture:** Building on its commitment to urban agriculture, the city will round out distribution of shelf-stable food with fresh produce by making small grants available to its 37 urban farms and 95 community gardens.

The COVID-19 Emergency Food Strategy leverages the efforts of hundreds of community, nonprofit, business and government partners; the city’s vast network of community-based programs and assets; and existing municipal infrastructure. The city estimates the strategy will require an initial financial investment of \$16 million, a mix of city, state, federal and private funds. And implementation will be phased in coming weeks as strategy details and funding are finalized.

Meeting the Need

In the first month of the coronavirus pandemic, Baltimore focused its emergency food effort on distribution of pre-made, grab-n-go meals. From March 16-April 16, city agencies partnered with community organizations to distribute 705,155 meals—581,405 of them to youth and families at 95 sites—and 1,840 grocery boxes. The majority were made possible through existing federal programs, allowing them to be propped up immediately following the March 13 closing of City Schools, which suspended delivery of 90,000 daily meals to students. City partners moved quickly to fill that gap for youth. But limited reach and growing demand forced an expanded strategy with multiple funding streams to meet the food needs of more and diverse Baltimoreans.

“The food strategy is a massive effort and I want to thank everyone involved for helping advance this essential piece of the city’s COVID-19 response,” says Mayor Young. “I am committed to doing everything possible to meet the needs of our residents.”