Engaging Community Voices to Guide Montgomery County's Food Security Programs

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Cara Levy
Master of Public Health Candidate, Harvard

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About the Fellow

Cara Levy is a Master of Public Health candidate at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. She is concentrating her studies on social and behavioral science. Her interests center around aging & disability, long-term care, and the social determinants of health. Before Harvard, Cara worked for almost five years at the Milken Institute, where she drove research, collaboration, investment, and improvements in brain health policy and care. She has co-authored reports on building brain health equity and increasing investment in dementia care. Levy is from Arlington, Virginia, and received her bachelor's degree from the University of Michigan.

Acknowledgments

Key Terms

Food system: Food systems are complex networks that include all the inputs and outputs associated with agricultural and food production and consumption.

Food systems resilience: The capability of individuals, communities, and the county to withstand and rapidly recover from food systems disruptions, stresses, and changes.

Food Sovereignty: The right of people to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through socially just, ecologically sound, and sustainable methods, and their collective right to define their own policies, strategies, and systems for food production, distribution, and consumption.

Introduction

Office of Food Systems Resilience

The Montgomery County Council, at the recommendation of the County Executive, Marc Elrich, established the Office of Food Systems Resilience (OFSR) in 2022 to develop and implement interagency budgetary, regulatory, and operational strategies to build a more equitable, efficient, resilient, and sustainable food system in Montgomery County.

The Council set up six mandates for the OFSR:

1. Serve as a liaison between the government and food system stakeholders;
2. Serve as a central liaison and coordinator for County government food system initiatives and projects;
3. Develop a strategy for improving the efficiency, equity, sustainability, and resilience of the food system in the County;
4. Collect and update the food system data needed to support strategic decision-making;
5. Support disaster response feeding planning and operations in coordination with local food assistance providers, the Department of Health and Human Services, and the Office of Emergency Management and Homeland Security; and
6. Represent the interests of Montgomery County in regional, state, national, and international food systems coordination efforts.

This paper will focus on the first through fourth legislative mandates and outline three strategies Montgomery County Government may support to ensure efficient and effective public administration of these mandates. They are:

1. leveraging technology to open new communication channels;
2. prioritizing partnerships with community-based organizations;
3. considering and evaluating additional resources for staffing across food security programs in Montgomery County Government.

The OFSR coordinates millions in County funds to over 90 nonprofits that work to ensure Montgomery County's residents do not go hungry. A component of their mission is to increase food security and food sovereignty, which they describe as "ensuring dignified access for all residents to nutritious and affordable food of their choice and supporting each resident's right to engage in and define their local food system." This paper suggests ways to ensure that the County's food security programs are improving the lives of its residents.

Montgomery County Food Access and Security

In Montgomery County, about 27% of households are food insecure.[1] Montgomery County has one of the highest costs of living in the country. For example, a 2023 study by the Capital Area Food Bank found that even among households making $120,000 – the median for the region – food insecurity is affecting one in five families.[2] In addition, Montgomery County's low-income population is also growing more rapidly than its middle- and high-income populations.[3] Food insecurity rates are highest in low-income households, which means the County will need to continue to invest in food security at a rate tied to the growing need. The Montgomery County Government (MCG) must continually measure food insecurity, partner with nonprofits to deliver food assistance, and conduct outreach to residents.

Changes in federal policy and reduced federal resources post-COVID also put more pressure on local jurisdictions, like Montgomery County, to feed residents. From 2020 to 2023, the federal government upped its support of food security by expanding free school meals to every public-school child and increasing Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) monthly benefits.[4] During the COVID-19 pandemic, the County primarily used Federal sources, like the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds, to create an emergency response food security program. This program, called Food Staples, began in June 2020 to support households during the COVID-19 pandemic. From 2020-2024, the County appropriated $58.5 million in federal and County funds to Food Staples. Approximately $20 million of that funding came directly from County general funds.

In the post-COVID era, the Federal government has rolled back those resources, meaning Montgomery County must fill in the gaps and maximize the available federal and state resources. During FY25, the County is transitioning the Food Staples program from emergency response to a grant program called the Community Food Assistance Competitive Grant Program. This grant program is funded at $3.5 million for FY25 and will allow food assistance providers to use the funds for more than just direct food purchasing, which was a limitation of the Food Staples program.

In the future, MCG's support of staffing, partnerships, and virtual outreach will help guide food security program implementation, target equity and accessibility initiatives, and improve funding decisions.

Executive Summary

The Office of Food Systems Resilience (OFSR), which coordinates the Montgomery County Government's (MCG) efforts to address hunger, seeks to establish strategies to regularly evaluate food security and the impact of its programs within the county. The multifaceted nature of food insecurity and Montgomery County's high cost of living and economic inequities make identifying and measuring food insecurity at the hyper-local level difficult. In addition, the size of Montgomery County and its diversity make it important to support the public administration of food security programs to ensure the effective execution of public programs. Future County budgets should leverage technology, fund partnerships with local nonprofits, and increase staffing levels to achieve these strategies. Sufficiently funding infrastructure within MCG will be more effective in meeting residents' needs and increasing residents' food sovereignty, collecting rich data, and building the capacity of community-based organizations.

Strategy 1: Leverage Technology to Open New Communication Channels

Use MCG's Technology Resources to Create a Resident Feedback Loop

The OFSR hopes to introduce another channel for engaging community voices - a virtual resident feedback loop. The County Council can help OFSR by promoting this feedback loop and encouraging their constituents to shape the food system they want to see.

Virtual feedback forms are not new to Montgomery County. The Department of Transit Services and the Gilchrist Center, among others, use virtual feedback forms to understand if residents are finding the information they need when accessing their websites and services. In addition, other localities use virtual forms to create a low-barrier-to-entry channel for residents.[5]

The virtual resident feedback loop for OFSR could start as a simple two-question form embedded on the OFSR webpage. The responses from residents could be checked and analyzed bi-monthly by office staff to help gather qualitative data. The initial mockup of the form could include these questions:

- How do you engage with Montgomery County's food system? Could you give examples?
- How can the County government better support the food needs of your household and other residents?

There must be language access and follow-up for virtual feedback channels like this to be useful.

As County Council members know, Montgomery County is incredibly diverse, and many residents have limited English proficiency. The OFSR and other MCG offices need the funding and resources to work with The Translations Unit and translate virtual feedback loop questions and responses into the following languages: Amharic, Chinese (Traditional), French, Korean, Spanish, and Vietnamese.[6]

MCG staff from the Department of Transit, the Gilchrist Center, and OFSR also need the support of the County Council to address the concerns brought up in these virtual forms. OFSR hopes that a virtual feedback form like this will give the team a better understanding of any gaps that may exist in their programs or ways to tailor their programs to serve residents better.

> **Case Study:**
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> Fort Knox, a military base in Kentucky, needed feedback from their residents on the base's amenities. They created short surveys where residents were able to give service feedback. The survey was virtual and promoted through QR codes in the base's frequented establishments, like their bowling alley. This short and virtual survey allowed the community to express their satisfaction or dissatisfaction quickly and easily on their mobile phone while giving the service providers actionable insight.

Strategy 2: Prioritize Partnerships with Community-Based Organizations and Community Leaders

Support Community Partnerships to Gather Rich Data

The nonprofit sector in Montgomery County acts as a bridge for MCG to reach and hear from residents. Since 2021, MCG has partnered with the Montgomery County Food Council to implement two resident food security and access surveys. The surveys each cost about $10,000.[7]

- The first survey, in 2021, aimed to understand the changing nature of food security and access across all ages during the COVID-19 pandemic. The survey garnered 2,500 responses that revealed food security concerns increased during the COVID-19. Twenty-

seven percent of the respondents answered that they are often worried they will run out of food before they can get more. This statistic climbed to forty-one percent for Spanish speakers in the county.[8]

- The second survey, in 2022, assessed the unique nature of childhood hunger. The survey respondents were primarily from low-income households, with two-thirds of respondents reporting an annual household income between $20,000-$59,999. Overall, 27% of the respondents reported high food insecurity levels, 62% reported moderate levels, and 11% reported being food secure.[9]

Additional details about these surveys can be found in Appendix A.

Surveys like this allow the County's food security programs to understand the level and nature of need. Both surveys show a rate of food insecurity of 27%. Funding biennial surveys of this kind will allow MCG to consistently measure need and the impact of investment on local issues.

In addition, MCG's food security programs may benefit from a data partnership with the Capital Area Food Bank (CAFB). The CAFB has fielded an annual food insecurity survey in the DC Metropolitan Region since 2020. In 2023, the survey garnered 5000+ responses; of those responses, 750 were residents of Montgomery County.[10] In the publicly reported findings, the survey found that Montgomery County has a 27% prevalence of food insecurity.

The county could contract with the CAFB to dive further into the county at the service region or even zip-code level in future surveys. The fixed costs of fielding a representative survey like this are high, but if the county partnered with CAFB and added resources to ensure robust sampling or asked Montgomery-specific questions, the costs would be marginal.

The full survey most likely cost the Capital Area Food Bank around $200,000.[11] The partnership with CAFB would allow Montgomery County to have an annual household food insecurity measurement and key data for budgeting and legislation.

Host an Annual Briefing on the State of Food Security

Some County residents may be unwilling to speak at a town hall or fill out surveys but are open about their fears, frustrations, and hopes when they talk with their faith leaders and other community leaders. MCG's Faith Liaison at the Office of Community Programs, Kate Chance, noted three faith leaders in the Hispanic, Black, and South Asian communities, respectively, who also work as food assistance providers. These faith leaders, Reverend Diana Wiengeier-Rayo of Hughes United Methodist Church, Reverend Barry Moultrie of Mount Cavalry Baptist, and Aman Shergill, have a unique understanding of food access and security in the County.

The OFSR already conducts listening sessions with Food Assistance Providers regularly throughout the year to ensure programs are built with their needs, constraints, experiences, and ideas in mind. For example, OFSR has begun to tailor their grant program to support not just the direct purchasing of food but also the infrastructure needed to support operations (like cold storage, packaging, and shelving).

In addition, the County Council could benefit from an annual Committee briefing on the state of food security. Each year, the briefing could include community leaders, like those listed above, who reflect Montgomery County residents' racial and ethnic diversity and the county's geographic diversity. Conducting annual hearings with Food Assistance Providers before final budgeting decisions are made will help the County Council understand the intricacies of food security program administration.

Strategy 3: Increase Staffing Levels Across MCG's Food Security Programs

Case Study of the Senior Nutrition Program

Montgomery County's Senior Nutrition Program has already proven that more staff leads to happier residents. Today, the SNP operates 39 congregate meal sites that serve about 3,000 meal participants a year. Congregate meals not only reduce food insecurity in Montgomery County seniors, but they also help serve the parallel purpose of reducing social isolation.

Before 2020, the MCG Senior Nutrition Program (SNP) had five full-time and one part-time County staff. Starting in 2020, Montgomery County's Senior Nutrition Program was able to hire more staff. To do this, Director Carol Craig used American Rescue Plan Act funding to create a new three-person "Quality Control Team" staffed by contractors that cost about $300k annually. Three years in, the impact of this Quality Control Team (QCT) is undeniable. The SNP has already found that additional staff has increased the uptake of and satisfaction with County-funded meals, made seniors feel heard, improved data collection, and improved connections with community-based partners. Increasing staffing levels in the Senior Nutrition Program has been a win-win-win because:

- The residents interact more directly with MCG staff to share their experiences and challenges and, therefore, allow County funds to be used more effectively;
- the County has more consistent and reliable data, which will also improve the effectiveness of its food programs, and;

- community-based organizations have more support and technical assistance with MCG's processes and any issues that may arise.

Resident Interaction

The additional SNP staffers attend the congregate meals, listen to the program participants, and act quickly to make changes that align with what they hear. For example, if seniors do not like a menu item, it is removed from the menu rotation and not served again. Staffers also found that many seniors could not read the menus in English, which meant that many seniors were ordering meals they weren't happy with. The SNP team then located translation help, and the menus are now available in six additional languages. Due to the work of this team, 92.4% of Montgomery County seniors surveyed said that they "feel that the program is listening to [their] opinions and suggestions."[12]

Data Gathering

The additional staffers have also strengthened data gathering from congregate meal sites by conducting surveys. The SNP staffers conduct in-person surveys after meals to collect data on demographics, the number of seniors living alone, and participant satisfaction. This data is vital for the program to continue receiving local, state, and federal support. These surveys are conducted using KeyPOINT, a technology-based live polling system that allows each senior to have a small keypad to record their answers to prompts like "Please rate the quality of the meals you receive now" displayed on a projector screen in 6 languages. Before hiring these three additional staffers, the SNP could only collect paper-based surveys with a low participation rate.

Community-Based Partner Capacity

In addition to these county-administered surveys, the additional SNP staffers provide technical assistance and support to community-based partners. The community partners have shared:

"With better food, we have received more demand for the program, requiring more support from SNP. The support required comes in a varied range of service requests: troubleshooting meal shortages, supply needs, responding to complaints, etc."

"We feel that our opinion is valued as well as the patron's opinion. Whenever an issue arises, it is taken into consideration immediately. The patrons appreciate the presence of SNP staff more often and being able to share their experience directly."

Consider and Evaluate Addition Resources to Bolster Staffing

Montgomery County Government should account for and fund the staff time and resources needed to deliver a food security program efficiently and effectively. As ARPA funds dry up, the County Council can consider and evaluate additional resources to bolster the OFSR and the Senior Nutrition Program.

Additional staff at OFSR could:

- **Increase the cultural competency of County-funded food assistance:** In Montgomery County, as County Executive Elrich and Councilmember Albornoz outlined in the Strategic Plan to End Childhood Hunger, every family's cultural preferences for food should be met.[13] This focus on cultural competency of food is vital in the County of over 1 million, where 34% of the population is foreign-born.[14] With additional staff, OFSR could work more closely with food assistance providers to understand the desires of residents who use their services and source culturally relevant food. Providing food that County residents know how to cook and want to eat is a key component of fighting food insecurity.
- **Make residents feel heard:** Additional staff could visit food assistance providers during their service to speak directly with residents. These staffers could also assist the providers with data collection. Multiple Food Assistance Providers remarked in a listening session that they could not collect demographic data on their patrons because, with limited staff, they must focus on quick food delivery, and reporting falls by the wayside.
- **Maximize federal and state resources:** There are opportunities to bring more federal and state resources into the county to support food security, but sourcing and shepherding those resources requires additional capacity. For example, the United States Department of Agriculture is launching a new grant and loan program focused on getting healthier foods to underserved communities in August.[15] The state of Maryland launched the ENOUGH Grant Program in July, which focuses on ending childhood poverty. MCG could use funding from this state grant program to bolster the Strategic Plan to End Childhood Hunger.[16]
- **Improve data collection and connections with community-based partners:** In 2023, the OFSR developed and fielded a questionnaire for Food Assistance Provider partners to report on their staffing capacity, funding sources, infrastructure, data capabilities, and details of their program delivery. This questionnaire helps fulfill the OFSR's fourth legislative mandate to "collect and update the food system data needed to support strategic decision-making," and it will continue to be used annually. Over 70 food assistance providers responded to this questionnaire, and their responses are helping

the OFSR tailor programs to be an effective funding partner. However, this questionnaire showed that OFSR's partner network could benefit from additional technical assistance, data collection, and reporting support. The OFSR found that some struggled to complete the questionnaire accurately, and Catherine Nardi, program manager at OFSR, spent many hours assisting.

Conclusion

The Montgomery County Council is a leader in supporting food security. This paper suggests three strategies to gather quantitative and qualitative data on residents' experience with MCG's food security programs. This paper argues that targeting resources toward engaging community voices to guide food security programs ensures that all residents have dignified access to nutritious and affordable food of their choice. It also highlights the infrastructure needed to connect the government with residents and community-based organizations, which directly informs investments.

Appendix A

County-funded Food Security and Access Surveys

COVID-19 Community Food Access Survey

Cost and Partners: In 2021, the County partnered with the nonprofit Montgomery County Food Council (MCFC), which subcontracted with Community Science, a county-based evaluation firm, to field a "COVID-19 Community Food Access Survey." In total, the survey cost the county $10,000. The survey cost included MCFC and Community Science's work to write survey questions, the MCFC's work to field the survey, and the purchase of $3,175 worth of grocery store gift cards to compensate survey participants.

Purpose: This survey aimed to understand how residents have been accessing food during the COVID-19 pandemic and to collect residents' feedback on how the County can best serve the community and improve food access during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Survey Tool: They fielded a two-part (9 questions in each part) survey virtually from January to March 2021 through the SurveyMonkey platform. The first nine questions asked about food access during the pandemic and any barriers or concerns around food access. The second nine questions were optional and asked about residents' awareness and experience accessing food assistance programs and resources. It also asked residents to rank the top two things the County can do to ensure food security.

Dissemination: MCFC sent the link to the survey through Montgomery County Public Schools, Montgomery County Government, and community partners. This type of survey method is called "convenience sampling." Convenience sampling is a popular type of non-probability sampling that involves gaining information from participants (the sample) who are 'convenient' for the researcher to access.[17] It was available in English, Spanish, French, Amharic, and Mandarin (the translations in French, Amharic, and Mandarin were inadequate; accordingly, accurate translations would cost more).

Reach and Findings: The survey garnered 2,500 responses that revealed food security concerns increased during the COVID-19. It also showed that Spanish speakers in the county have the highest food security concerns. Some topline findings include:

- During the COVID-19 pandemic, 34% of respondents were sometimes worried they would run out of food before getting more, 27% were often worried, and 13% were

always worried. Spanish respondents were more likely to be often worried (41%) that they would run out.

- Food security concerns increased in every service area during the pandemic and were highest in mid-county.
- 71% of respondents were shopping inside grocery stores to access food. Spanish speakers were much more likely to access food from food banks or pantries (52%) and MCPS meal sites (49%).
- 46% of English speakers and 60% of Spanish speakers said they don't know how to request help from food assistance programs.
- Respondents ranked the top two things the County can do to make sure people have enough food to eat: Offer more variety of food assistance programs and provide cash assistance for residents to purchase food directly.

2022 Childhood Hunger Survey

Cost and Partners: In 2022, the County partnered once again with MCFC to field a "Childhood Hunger Survey" that sought input on food security and access from parents, grandparents, and legal guardians of children in the County. Again, the survey was written in partnership with Community Science and implemented by MCFC via SurveyMonkey. MCFC subcontracted Sharp Insights, another County-based survey research firm, to analyze the data. In total (according to MCFC recollection), about $6,000 was spent on the survey. Survey participants were randomly selected to receive grocery store gift cards to compensate for their time.

Purpose: The results guided the Strategic Plan to End Childhood Hunger.[18]

Survey Tool: The survey questions focused on the household's food security, barriers to food access over the past year, food assistance distribution from food pantries and the like, benefit programs like Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and demographic questions like race/ethnicity, income, household size, and languages spoken.

Dissemination: The survey was open virtually to respondents from August 25, 2022, to September 15, 2022. The survey used a convenience sample that gained access to the link through the MCFC distribution channels, food assistance provider channels, and county government communication channels. It was available in English and Spanish. The survey was available in a reduced number of languages due to the low response rates in Amharic, Mandarin, and French from the 2021 COVID-19 survey.

Reach and Findings: 1,315 people responded to the survey in total. The survey respondents were primarily from low-income households, with two-thirds reporting an annual household

income between $20,000-$59,999, 70% reporting receiving food distribution assistance, and 75% of respondent households enrolled in food benefit programs. Some topline findings include:

- Overall, 27% of the respondents reported high food insecurity levels, 62% reported moderate levels, and 11% reported being food secure. Those taking the Spanish survey were significantly more likely than those taking the English survey to report high levels of insecurity over the last year.
- Food secure households are more likely to usually get food from grocery stores (69%) than food insecure households (50%). In contrast, food insecure households are more likely to use food banks, pantries, or community food distribution sites (43%) than food secure households (19%).
- Near the end of the survey, respondents were asked to choose two aspects that would make it easier to get food for their household from a list. For food insecure households, the top three food resources desired included increased food benefit amounts (36%), food assistance programs that are more accessible (35%), and gift cards to buy groceries (29%)
- Participants *not* receiving assistance from food banks, pantries, and/or other community food distribution or meal programs (n=391) were questioned about what kept them from asking for help from the programs and provided with a list of choices. The highest number (41%) of respondents that did not receive food assistance reported that they did not know how to ask for help.

Appendix B

Racial Equity and Social Justice Impact (RESJ) Statement

Purpose: The purpose of racial equity and social justice (RESJ) impact statements is to evaluate the anticipated impact of the recommended strategies on racial equity and social justice in the County. Racial equity and social justice refer to a process that focuses on centering the needs, leadership, and power of communities of color and low-income communities with the goal of eliminating racial and social inequities.[19] Achieving racial equity and social justice usually requires seeing, thinking, and working differently to address the racial and social harms that have caused racial and social inequities.

Food Security and Racial Equity: Food insecurity disproportionately impacts Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) individuals, households with children, and those with lower educational attainment and incomes. The Capital Area Food Bank's 2023 Hunger Report reported that within the

food-insecure population in the DC metro region, 44% of individuals were Black, 27% were Hispanic, and only 18% were white.[20]

Anticipated RESJ Impacts: The recommendations in this paper include opening new feedback channels for residents and food assistance providers, prioritizing partnerships with community-based organizations and community leaders and increasing staffing levels across food security programs in Montgomery County Government. These recommendations aim to center community voices in MCG's food security programs and are built on the concept of food sovereignty. Food Sovereignty is the "right of people to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through socially just, ecologically sound, and sustainable methods, and their collective right to define their own policies, strategies, and systems for food production, distribution, and consumption."[21]

Data demonstrates that the populations most in need of food security programs are BIPOC residents. If the strategies in this report work as intended, these residents will have greater power to shape the food assistance they use. As shown through the Senior Nutrition Program's recent decision to publish menus in 7 languages, RESJ increases when MCG engages and listens to community voices. In addition, many of the community partners this paper recommends partnering with are important leaders in BIPOC communities. Improving the capacity of BIPOC-run nonprofits to support their communities will have positive RESJ impacts.

These strategies do not address the underlying causes of food insecurity, like economic inequities, so I anticipate the favorable RESJ impact will be small.

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