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<https://www.wsj.com/articles/pandemic-growing-need-strain-u-s-food-bank-operations-11594891802>

## LOGISTICS REPORT

# Pandemic, Growing Need Strain U.S. Food Bank Operations

Food charities are coping with shortages of some consumer goods, a crush of donations of others and soaring demand as they reset logistics for the Covid-19 pandemic era



People picked up food donations in Brooklyn, N.Y., in May. Food pantries have seen long lines during the Covid-19 pandemic.

PHOTO: STEPHANIE KEITH/GETTY IMAGES

By *Jennifer Smith*

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**BROOKLYN, N.Y.—**People start lining up as early as 6 a.m. these days outside an emergency food pantry in Brooklyn's Flatbush neighborhood.

Theresa Gilbert, a 61-year-old in-home care giver waiting in line on a recent scorching-hot day, said money has been tight since March, when she caught a cold on the job and the agency she works for sent her home. She hasn't worked since, and the food she gets here helps make ends meet.

"Whatever I have, I make it do," Ms. Gilbert said.

Demand for the free vegetables, milk and canned goods on offer here has surged since the coronavirus pandemic torpedoed the U.S. economy, closing businesses and thrusting millions out of work. Social-services provider Camba Inc., which runs the pantry, said it served more than 18,000 people last month, nearly five times as many as in February, before the virus took hold in the U.S.

WSJ NEWSLETTER

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The scene is being repeated across the country as the growing need hits food banks and pantries, leading to long lines of people seeking food and straining providers coping with shortages of high-demand products like canned goods even as they handle a crush of produce from sidelined food-service operations. Food-relief organizations are retooling their operations for the Covid-19 era, testing out new distribution tactics, bringing on temporary labor and scrambling to secure storage space to meet a level of need that some say could stretch into next year and beyond.

Hunger-relief organization Feeding America, a nationwide network of 200 food banks and 60,000 food pantries and meal programs, estimates the pandemic could push an additional 17 million people into what it calls food insecurity this year. More than 82% of U.S. food banks are serving more people than they were

last year, with an average increase of 50%, according to a June survey by the group.

“The pandemic is putting pressure on a system that was already struggling to make sure all the food we are producing finds its way to people,” said Emily Broad Leib, director of the Harvard Law School Food Law and Policy Clinic.

Food banks act as the logistics arm for a swath of hunger-relief programs, overseeing supply chains that connect donations to those in need. They recover surplus food from supermarkets, manufacturers, farmers and government agencies and then ship, store and distribute that food to smaller agencies such as food pantries and meal programs.

When the pandemic first hit, consumer stockpiling decimated the supply of shelf-stable products that are the backbone of food-relief efforts. Donations of items like rice and soup dried up, forcing many food banks to buy the goods instead and compete with retailers and other food banks. The products remain in high demand as coronavirus caseloads soar in many U.S. states.

“There is almost a bidding war for some of this product,” said Kristopher Tazelaar, a spokesman for Second Harvest Foodbank of Southern Wisconsin.



A worker moved boxes of food onto the floor of Chicago's United Center in March. Food donations were stored at the home of the Chicago Bulls and Blackhawks after the pandemic shut down their seasons.

PHOTO: /ASSOCIATED PRESS

One manufacturer told the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank it would

only honor 50% of the organization's outstanding purchase orders. "We had over 80 tractor-trailer loads delayed, shorted or canceled," said Chief Executive Lisa Scales.

Earlier in the pandemic, Ms. Scales said, the group was hearing from vendors who told them things like: "If the shipping container gets loaded, and if the ship isn't abandoned at sea, and if they let it dock, and if it clears customs without being seized by [federal authorities], and if we can find trucking, we'll have your rice there in six weeks."

Those delayed loads are coming in now, she said, and the volumes are straining the group's warehouse operations and capacity. The food bank leased space in a nearby convention center in May and June before that site was set to reopen for events.

Like other food banks, it is leasing outside storage space at higher-than-normal levels and has brought on more workers to handle the goods, adding to growing costs.

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Earlier this year, the Greater Chicago Food Depository was using the United Center, the home arena for the National Basketball Association's Chicago Bulls and the National Hockey League's Chicago Blackhawks, as a logistics hub. The organization sent almost 920,000 pounds of food to the arena between late March and late May, when faster distribution of the food boxes reduced its need for extra storage.

Volumes at the Houston Food Bank, the largest in Feeding America's network, have more than doubled since the pandemic. The group distributed on average 25 trailer loads of food a day in May and June compared with 10 during the same period last year. "We've been spending a fortune on trucking," Chief Executive Brian Greene said.

The group has rented a second warehouse and is securing a third, with more space to accommodate volunteers working under social-distancing requirements. That facility also will have refrigerated storage to accommodate a more than 10 percentage-point jump in donated produce since the pandemic shut down much of the U.S. restaurant and food-service industries.



Boxes of food were handed out by the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank at a drive-through distribution center in Pittsburgh in April.

PHOTO: GENE J. PUSKAR/ASSOCIATED PRESS

“The building doesn’t just grow,” said Mr. Tazelaar of Second Harvest Foodbank of Southern Wisconsin, which is trying to secure more cooler and freezer space. “Our partner agencies, a lot of them are doing it with the freezer you might have down in your basement.”

Once goods reach pantries, social-distancing requirements are complicating distribution. Some groups are switching from their usual supermarket-type setups, where people pick out the goods they want, to drive-up operations, in which workers assemble boxes ahead of time and place them in people’s trunks.

Organizations seeking to reach seniors and people in home quarantine are sometimes working with big digital operators focused on residential delivery. [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) Inc. is donating delivery services to food banks across the U.S. through its network of Amazon Flex drivers. DoorDash Inc., known for its restaurant deliveries, adapted its software to accommodate bulk food orders and batched delivery routes through partnerships with government agencies, restaurants and nonprofits.

New York City-based Camba, which relies on a mix of donations and purchased goods, said earlier shortfalls of basic items like milk are easing. Recently, the group received funding from a state program aimed at rerouting surplus agricultural products from New York dairy farmers and growers to food banks.

Much of the milk, yogurt and produce the group gets now is given out the day it is

delivered, said Janet Miller, Camba's senior vice president. "Everything is kind of just-in-time."

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