



COVID-19 Pandemic: Food Access Challenges and Community Response

In 2020, the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic had a dramatic impact on our community's health and economic well being creating visible and urgent consequences throughout the food system. Many people experienced financial hardship and food insecurity, some for the first time. Local food businesses struggled financially while simultaneously working to comply with new public health guidelines. Many food service employees lost their job or had hours cut.

A surge in demand for food at grocery stores led to a decrease in food rescue. As a result, food banks ran short on some much-needed items. In addition, food banks and pantries struggled to find volunteers while programs had to adapt quickly to implement new procedures to keep staff and clients safe.

Fortunately, many organizations stepped up to meet the growing need for food assistance. Food Gatherers, our local food bank, expanded deliveries, pre-packed food to help agencies with limited volunteers, and utilized the support of the National Guard to increase the amount of food distributed in Washtenaw County. Growing Hope, The Farm at St. Joe's, and Zilke Farms Kitchen established [The Ypsi Area Online Market](#), with a drive-thru pick-up option. The Michigan Department of Health and Human Services leveraged options from USDA to increase SNAP benefits for eligible households and to provide new benefits to families with kids participating in school meals.

As COVID-19 continues to spread in Washtenaw County, strong racial and geographic disparities are evident. Although African Americans make up just 12% of the population of Washtenaw County, they represent 48% of total COVID-19 cases. Some residents of rural areas of the County have experienced limited or no grocery and pharmacy access, as well as a lack of broadband access. These limitations increase the suffering of rural populations disproportionately during the pandemic.

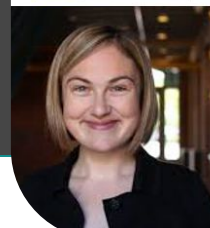
The Washtenaw County Food Policy Council has been sharing important updates with the public regarding our community's response to the COVID-19 pandemic and has taken action to ensure federal policies and practices support food access for our neighbors during this crisis. WFPC will continue to monitor and respond to the challenges our community members face in obtaining food.

Washtenaw County Food Policy Council (WFPC) envisions that:

- The WFPC is a vibrant group that regularly advises County Commissioners, the County Board of Health, City Council Members, and other local leaders on issues affecting our local food system.
- The WFPC is engaged with state legislators to provide insights on bills that could impact Washtenaw County.
- Members of the community know where to go to get help or to get connected to help if they are in need of food or assistance applying for SNAP benefits.
- Many new farms are starting each year and can connect to older farms for mentoring, and long-standing farms are evolving scale and scope as appropriate.
- Local produce is easily accessible through a variety of retail outlets.
- County departments are modeling best practices, such as procuring local food for catered meetings and offering healthy vending in county buildings.
- The WFPC has the organizational structure to respond rapidly to funding opportunities and requests for collaboration

Candidate Forum

On September 30, 2020, the Washtenaw County Food Policy Council held a virtual forum with the state representative candidates running to represent residents in the four House districts of Washtenaw County. The goal was to engage the candidates on important food system issues and to educate voters in advance of the November 3rd election. Moderator Zoe Clark of Michigan Radio asked the five candidates who participated how they would address issues of structural inequities that impact healthy food access, support for small farms, and assistance for restaurants, bars and their employees during the pandemic. Fifty-two community members tuned in to watch, listen and learn. WFPC partnered with Agricole, Argus Farm Stop, Food Gatherers, Growing Hope, Taste the Local Difference and MSU Extension to organize the event.



Top left: Yousef Rabhi, Felicia Brabec, Martin Church
Bottom left: Zoe Clark (moderator), Jean Holland, Donna Lasinski

POLICY ACTION TEAM (PAT) 2020 HIGHLIGHTS

Farmers & Institutional Purchasing

Consists of farmers & non-farmers who seek to create a voice for growers by engaging in policy advocacy.

This PAT organized on a number of actions including:
 - Writing an [advocacy letter](#) to our Federal Legislators: Ensure COVID-19 Aid Gets to Farmers and Food Systems
 - Writing an [educational letter](#) to Chelsea City Council Members and Staff on the importance of local food access and farmers market safety during the pandemic
 - Collaborating with the Planning & Zoning PAT to develop a Local Meat and Poultry Processing fact-sheet

Food Access & Nutrition

Works to make healthy food more accessible in Washtenaw County & beyond

Food Access and Nutrition PAT partnered with the [Washtenaw County Health Department](#), with support from a [Michigan Local Food Council Network Seed Grant](#), to collect and share food insecurity data for Washtenaw County. A [Food Insecurity Dashboard](#) on the [healthforallwashtenaw.org](#) website brings together the available data and a [handout](#) combines numeric data with stories from the community about food insecurity during this pandemic. For more information, visit the blog on the [Washtenaw County Food Policy Council](#) website.

Food Waste & Packaging

Develops campaigns around food waste prevention & recovery systems from businesses, institutions, residents & agencies

Collaborated with the Washtenaw County Environmental Health department and several [Michigan governmental departments](#) on the creation of a Michigan Department of Education memo: [Updated Guidance Regarding Share Tables in School Food Programs](#). This document provides official guidance on share tables to schools statewide and encourages the use of share tables as a way to reduce potential food waste and to **encourage** consumption of healthy school meals.

Planning & Zoning

Examines land use issues around the food system as they relate to zoning & planning ordinances & regulations

In 2020, this PAT researched **meat and poultry processing options** for Washtenaw County farmers, which shed light on supply chain limitations in our local food system. To educate local decision-makers and the public, the PAT created a [fact-sheet](#) which was distributed at two public meetings in Washtenaw County and via WFPC social media. The Planning and Zoning PAT **will continue to promote informed decision-making** around this issue with the goal of filling this gap in our local food system.

Why Did the Chicken Cross the County?



"I am frustrated by the lack of local processing options for beef. It's important to have a close relationship with the butcher, and that's hard to do when the best option is two hours away. **Customers want a local product** and to me that means locally processed."
 - John Cox, Baseline Farm, Scio Township

Pollinators

Researches policies and develops educational campaigns that aim to protect and promote essential pollinator populations.

Of the more than 300 crops grown in Michigan, about 100 are pollinated by bees. The Pollinators PAT came out of hibernation in 2020 and is working to identify new policy agenda items aimed at **preserving and increasing native pollinator habitat in Washtenaw County**. Equally important to this team's success is the **engagement and education of elected officials and community members** on policies and practices that support essential pollinator populations.

BY THE NUMBERS

15 Appointed Members

1,531 Website Visitors

18 Average # of Council Meeting Attendees

703 Facebook Page Likes

441 Listserv Subscribers