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First name: Donna

Last name: Sivulka

Organization:

Title:

Comments: Hello, my name is Donna Sivulka and I am a supporter of Chatham Outreach Alliance (CORA Pantry) located in Chatham County, Pittsboro, North Carolina. Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on the Coronavirus Response Grants.

When the pandemic hit, CORA saw hunger in the community dramatically increase.

They served over 800 families who had never visited the Pantry before.

They realized a 137% increase in demand across all visits and all programs.

They realized a 57% increase in demand, indicating need both in terms of more families to serve and providing that service much more frequently.

Poignantly, many of the first-time users of the Pantry in 2020 were individuals who had donated to CORA in the past. These people were now on the "receiving end" of help instead of the "giving end."

The pandemic brought challenges for continuing CORAs programs.

They shifted their client choice pantry to a pre-packed drive-thru style pantry.

Many volunteers (particularly older ones) were forced to temporarily leave in order to comply with stay-at-home safety measures, thus leaving a small staff and fewer volunteers to provide for those facing food insecurity.

In order to manage the demand with a greatly diminished staff and loss of volunteers, client service hours had to be cut by roughly 50%.

Severe constraints in the food supply chain limited the amount, variety, and quality of food CORA was able to provide for families in need.

These constraints resulted in additional costs to CORA, including the following:

Food - because CORA couldn't purchase from its usual sources, in some cases they paid regular grocery store prices that were as much 645% higher than discount/ wholesale distributor prices.

Transportation - their transportation costs skyrocketed as the limited staff drove from store to store in search of food each day. Groceries were unable to sell in bulk, so staff would travel to as many as 12 grocery stores per day across a 5 county radius buying as many canned and dry goods as possible.

CORA and people living in Chatham County care about providing hungry families with fresh, healthy food, and we want to be able to source that food from farmers in our community. However, without adequate freezer/refrigerator space, overall storage, and transportation, we are not equipped to handle and distribute fresh, perishable products. Having funding for this infrastructure would enable us to complete this last-mile link in the emergency feeding systems supply chain and provide the highest quality food to families while supporting local farmers.

That's why I'm submitting this comment to show my support for the following recommendations. In particular, I would like to emphasize the need for grants to include infrastructure additions or upgrades for food pantries and last-mile hunger relief organizations.

I ask that any new programs be designed so that food pantries can access necessary, equitable relief. Uses of funding should include:

Refrigeration, dry or cold storage, other equipment and upgrades

Food delivery costs (fuel and maintenance)  
Transportation services or equipment  
Personal Protective Equipment  
Packaging and labeling materials  
Signage  
Food safety practice upgrades  
Cleaning supplies  
Temperature screening equipment  
Purchasing or leasing temporary space  
Staff time for implementing COVID-19 shifts, protocols, etc.

As noted in a recent New York Times article, we are not out of the woods, yet, and communities need their food pantries to be strong, not just during the immediate Covid crisis, but "six months, 12 months, 18 months from now, when people are still struggling with food insecurity."

The USDA can be a huge source of support for CORA and food pantries across the U.S.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.