

Strengthening Communities Grant—Covid-19 Rapid Response Grant

Strengthening Communities: Food Distribution, Safety, and Student Engagement

Project Abstract

Our project, *Strengthening Communities: Food Distribution, Safety, and Student Engagement*, encompasses strengthening community partnerships by working together with local food pantry partners to provide planning, food items, and supplies for food distribution in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, we will be working together with community partners and university students to develop educational materials for community members receiving distributed food on how to prep, cook, and store said food items. We will use Purdue University Extension evidence-based researched content with partner provided county statistics and proven needs to develop education and curriculum that is beneficial to our target, limited resource audience affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, this will include a social media educational campaign with video tutorials and outside educational resources in order to reach a broader audience base.

Supplies and planning for this project will include strong, sturdy packaging material to help make transport and distribution of food items more efficient and user friendly for those packaging and receiving. Along with protective materials such as gloves, masks, and barrier materials to help stop the spread of germs between individuals. Food items identified as unavailable or needed since the COVID19 pandemic started will be purchased to help fill gaps in needed nutrition. Purchasing of food items will be targeted at local farm businesses and food banks to help support the local economy. We anticipate that this will provide safer distribution options by reducing the spread of germs using newly purchases materials, while addressing the needs of the growing number of pantry recipients.

Reflection and feedback for this project will be collected through verbal, hard copy, and online assessment. This will involve contacting database/returning and new pantry clients through Operation Love Ministries and Salvation Army programs, distributing paper copies that can be returned, and online

formats provided through partner websites and social media. This assessment will include potential impacts on food pantry partner community and student engagement, pantry distribution participants and volunteers, education materials, and student involvement. We anticipate several hundred individuals and families to receive, learn, and be impacted by this project. Partners to increase engagement and connections within the community and with their clients. Then, potentially gather impact on student increased knowledge and civic engagement within local communities in or outside of their own. We hope to increase awareness and understanding of students to overall needs and food access possibilities within a community. Results will be used among partners to help sustain and expand this project for the future.

Project Narrative

Our wonderful community partners include two local Food Pantries, Operation Love Ministries and our local Salvation Army. Each provides a wide range of services to the community including food pantry items, fresh produce (when available), toiletries, clothing, utility assistance, and more. Our organization became connected with these partners through the Madison County Local Food Network that helps community partners come together working towards “creating a more vibrant community that provides equitable access to healthy, affordable, and nutritious foods to all Madison County residents”. In this capacity, we have worked together to help expand community food pantry reach, knowledge and education, and food rescue initiatives.

Operation Love Ministries’ mission is to “reach out as the hands and feet of Christ in Madison County to provide tangible goods and services to those in need”. Salvation Army’s mission works towards “preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ and to meet human needs in His name without discrimination”. The limited resource audiences we all work to serve bring us together as long-standing partners, working side by side to provide food access and education creating sustainability for local individuals and families. As a partner providing resources to address needs of local communities, we will work to help provide education alongside guidance and participation from Operation Love Ministry and Salvation Army and their clients through hard copy distribution and social media, order durable

packaging for additional distribution of food, and strategic planning sessions to help foster long-term sustainability of food access.

Operation Love Ministries and Salvation Army will be our points of contact with the live audience base we are trying to reach. In development of these resources, we will keep in contact virtually, with coordinated social distancing drop off of materials. Volunteers with these organizations will use packaging materials to assemble food and education items for distribution. Then, at partner organizations designated times and days, distribution of packaged items will be given out to local individuals and families via drive-up food pantries. Food pantry clients will also receive a flyer highlighting online opportunities bringing more awareness and increasing reach within target audience. Both partner organizations will report back with how many individuals and families were served, and amount of social media activity to help show impact and outcomes of the project. Which will then be used to accommodate future projection of need and sustainability planning for the project.

Madison county ranks 87 out of 92 in the County Health Rankings for overall health outcomes, 91 out of 92 for health behaviors, and 92 out of 92 for quality of life. In the most recent data reports from 2017-2019, Madison County had between 17-17.5% of the population living in poverty and 24% of children living in poverty. Of the public schools in Madison County, all but one school district has at least one school that qualifies for more than 50% free and reduced lunch. Two of these school districts qualify for over 50% free and reduced lunch for every school in the district. Our pantry partners, and those clients and audiences we are targeting to serve with this project qualifies in Anderson School district which has a district free and reduced lunch total of 75%.

Both partner locations reside in the 46016-zip code area, one of the most at need zip codes in Madison county. According to U.S. Census studies, the 46016-zip code area estimates a median household income of \$28,340, which is about \$20,000 dollars less than the whole of Madison County that estimates a median household income of \$47,436. Per-capita Income is estimated at one of the lowest in the county at \$15,368. According to USDA Food Access research and mapping, the 46016-area code

identifies as having low income and low access residents that are 1 or more miles away from the nearest supermarket or grocery store. As part of that same tract, 100 or more households have been identified as having no access to a vehicle or transportation access to reach those supermarkets or grocery stores.

This project most closely aligns with an episodic place-based project, that has potential to be reoccurring through continued partnership and need within the community. As distribution of food continues, we plan to monitor participation, use, and need of these resources through survey and verbal feedback to ensure the greatest community impact. Student outcomes will include increased knowledge and potential understanding of community demographics and social determinants based on identified needs and research of Madison County, increasing skills for creating education and curriculum, and developing civic engagement skills learning how to work with local non-for-profit partners providing aid in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Students will interview and engage with partners via video call sessions to learn more about locally identified needs, research tools for finding community-based data (Census, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Data, local hospital and health department data, CDC Change Tool Data, and more), and development of education for food pantry clients. Students will have the option to volunteer for in person opportunities with our local food pantry partner organizations onsite for prepping of food distribution items and education, and on distribution days. Students who take this option will be given safety supplies to use, along with other volunteers, using the protective gear requested through this grant process. As an objective or potential outcome, this option will give students the opportunity to learn skills for program and/or project implementation, knowledge of food pantry structures and mechanics of operation, and strategies for adjusting processes and procedures during a pandemic. Those students who do not choose to volunteer in person will be provided with a live stream video tour of food pantry facilities, packaging of food pantry items and education, and on day of distribution. With anticipation of still learning the same skills in a different format. Following either option will be a question and answer session with local food pantry partners. Students will also have the options to participate in the long-term sustainability strategic

planning sessions once assessment feedback has been fully collected. Lastly, along with all others involved in this project, students will fill out a feedback survey on their experiences and learning.

Our food pantry partners plan to engage with students as much as safety procedures during the COVID-19 pandemic will allow. As experts in their fields, they will provide students with learning opportunities by providing knowledge and skills training through virtual research and development sessions, opportunities for hands on and virtual volunteer sessions, and strategic planning using survey results and feedback from overall project. Partners will also provide feedback in their own survey assessment of project successes, project challenges, and over student performance and progress. Involvement with this project will also be open to other college institutions and student participation such as, but not limited to, Anderson University and Ball State University. Other areas of Purdue Extension will also be invited to help in the development process including educators under the Nutrition Education Program and others under Health and Human Sciences Department.

Cultivating a culture in communities takes a lot of time and patience. In this case, we will try to foster expanded community partnerships and ties through encouragement to participate in social distancing volunteer opportunities, engagement with social media opportunities, and adopting similar practices in their abilities to provide community resources. We are willing and planning to share best practices, learning experiences, outcomes, impacts, and strategies to make this project sustainable in the future. These strategies include increasing partnerships to expand reach of food access and education for individuals and families, working with local foundations and sponsors to gain additional funding for resources and materials, and reaching out to new and unique partners to share in mutual success throughout our local communities.

We have several local media outlets to help promote this project and its outcomes. Our local newspaper provides updates on opportunities for the public in response to COVID-19 in hard copy and online. Again, we hope to make a large impact via social media through partner Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter profiles. Our partners are also involved in several local coalition groups that work with other

partner organizations and/or our target audience groups to share information and opportunities aligned with this project. These coalition groups include the Madison County Local Food Network, Community Services Council, Anderson Indiana Main Street, Madison County Prevent Child Abuse, and more. Within this we should be able to provide a description on the project, timeline for implementation, expected goals and impact, number of individuals and families served, and plans for moving forward after initial run of the project. We anticipate the need for these additional services will continue now and as a continued response to the COVID-19 later stages. Thus, exemplifying the need to keep our community updated on opportunities for food access.

Professional development has always been a high priority of Purdue University Extension in developing expertise for providing services to Indiana counties. Even after working in my position for a few years, being newly placed in this county over the last year, it makes a difference to be able to provide hands on knowledge and data that communities can rely on and use to make decisions. Many are also concerned at the county level with projecting future needs as it relates to the impact of the Coronavirus. By establishing data and research found in this project, preparedness and accountability of needs will help with future projections in several areas including funding efforts, resources, and place-based projects counties can and will implement in the future. By working to provide this information it will enhance my skills to provide our local communities with evidence-based information and increase my reliability and accountability with individual and organizational partners.

As we alluded to in previous statements, we will continue to work closely with local foundations and sponsors for additional funding to support the continuation of this project. Whether it is access to reoccurring funding cycles to expand impact of the program, bringing on new partnerships and/or sponsors to the project, or increasing volunteer support to help with continuous management of the project our community has an invested commitment to see it through into the future of responding to the COVID-19 pandemic needs. Other avenues for sustaining this project include continued education provided by Purdue University Extension, expanding partner relations and outreach for the project, and

establish close ties with local material and food providers to work strategies that will make buying more affordable for food pantry budgets.

Additional Questions Required for COVID19 Response

How is the institution leveraging its resources as an anchor institution to support stakeholders in the surrounding community?

Purdue University Extension in Madison County is working to engage and support local stakeholders to help surrounding communities in several ways. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have been working to secure new partnerships to aid in food rescue and distribution throughout the county. These partnerships include local restaurants, connecting and strengthening ties between coalition partners, identifying and approaching local businesses and non-profits with transportation abilities and resources, and working with funders and sponsors to help provide needed materials, supplies, volunteers, and food items to sustain the food distributions numbers and processes. In addition, extension is providing free-online learning opportunities. While continuing to work and promote local community gardens as a central point of food access in local neighborhoods and food desert areas.

Operation Love Ministries has moved its services to drive through and call-in to continue answering questions during normally posted hours as well as serving the community with food distribution every week. It has a touchless service with masks on every volunteer and pre-bagged foods. Using its partnership with Midwest Food Bank, which provides thousands of pounds of food for free every month, it is able to give basic essentials such as rice, pasta, and shelf stable items; however, purchased distribution supplies are necessary for the repackaging of bulk items as well as for the increased volume of service. Operation Love is also printing out information about available services during this time, such as information about unemployment, stimulus checks, SNAP benefits, and other pantries available. These informational handouts are being distributed with food boxes each week with the most current information on services.

At the Salvation Army, we are using our resources to serve the community affected by the COVID 19 pandemic with food and other items needed to meet essential needs for those most vulnerable throughout Madison County. In doing this, we are fulfilling the intent of our donors and the needs of clients in the best manner possible. Our large food pantry distribution takes place at the end of every month serving several hundred clients. Currently, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we are also implementing a drive-up model in which items are provided in pre-packaged bundles, and volunteers are given masks and gloves to help with distribution. We are working with Purdue Extension to insert additional education information for clients during the distribution. Throughout the month we are still providing open phone call services and giving out additional supplies on a needed basis such as baby care and food items, toiletries, and some financial assistance.

What type of impact do you foresee this effort having within the community?

This project will help increase sustainability for community partners in providing needed food access for our local communities, while also providing educational resources about available services and developing at-home skills. Another impact we foresee by implementing our project is the potential for increased sustainability of distribution and safety through the purchase of needed packaging supplies and safety gear. For example, typical bags for distribution are used and donated from the public due to the expense of purchasing them. With the ability to purchase new bags to serve the public, we will cut down on the spread of germs and continue to serve the growing number of people in need with the COVID 19 Pandemic. With additional protective gear for our intake staff and volunteers, we will be able to ensure continued service to our community during these dangerous times by keeping our front-line staff, volunteers, and potential clients they come in contact with safe and protected.

Project Assessment Strategies

Students will establish, develop, and strive to improve their civic engagement throughout the *Strengthening Communities: Food Distribution, Safety, and Student Engagement* project building

structure, implementation, and feedback processes. Civic engagement outcomes for students will take place through developing connection skills with local partners, education development, and engaging with the community food distribution processes. Through these project steps, we hope to increase student knowledge of local communities, accessible research knowledge and tools, ability to create targeted education materials, and knowledge of onsite mechanics for food pantries during the COVID-19 pandemic. Each will be assessed by the developed materials used during project development, implementation, and strategic planning of impact. These will include quality of research for local county identified needs for food and education, content provided for educational materials given out at distributions, and development of strategic planning action steps for future sustainability. Experience of the students within the project is also important for future engagement opportunities and will be assessed through our project survey tool.

Local community partner impact in the long term will help to provide structure and sustainability for continued aid to the community in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Assessment surveys to collect local pantry data have not recently been used to help food pantries anticipate their ability to provide impact on the community. Our project survey assessments will be used to assess the feasibility of providing these services in the long term, and what additional items and services might be needed to continue providing for the community through this project. Results will help create SMART goals and action steps in strategic planning sessions follow the implementation of this project. Also, in assessing the numbers of outreach to the community, based on distribution to individuals and families along with social media interactions, we can identify current reach and impact and anticipate future need of Madison County local communities.

| <u><i>Assessment Table</i></u> | | |
|--|--|-----------------------------|
| Output/Outcome/Impact: Increased student community research and knowledge | | |
| <u>Activity</u> | <u>Evidence (reflection, artifact, data)</u> | <u>Assessment Technique</u> |

| | | |
|--|---|--|
| Research local and national databases for Madison County demographics and identified needs | Excel Document with all recorded data found on local communities. | Compare with current data used by community partners and Purdue University Extension to fill in gaps for student and community research information. |
| | | |

Output/Outcome/Impact: Increase student ability to develop educational materials

| <u>Activity</u> | <u>Evidence (reflection, artifact, data)</u> | <u>Assessment Technique</u> |
|--|---|---|
| Work with community food pantry partners and Purdue University Extension to create education materials for community distribution. | Students will create their own artifacts for this part including handouts on food prep, food safety, food storage, and recipe card using food distribution items. | Check list/Rubric list of content items expected to be found on education piece, based on identified needs, and what has been currently and previously used to address community education. |
| Student made materials distributed to community. | Materials developed by student. | Project Survey Assessment |
| | | |

Output/Outcome/Impact: Knowledge of food pantry structure and participation in project

| <u>Activity</u> | <u>Evidence (reflection, artifact, data)</u> | <u>Assessment Technique</u> |
|---|--|-----------------------------|
| Engagement in with food pantry partners and distribution process. | Attending in person volunteer opportunities and/or live stream sessions with community partners. | Project Survey Assessment |
| | | |

| Output/Outcome/Impact: Community Impact | | |
|---|---|---|
| <u>Activity</u> | <u>Evidence (reflection, artifact, data)</u> | <u>Assessment Technique</u> |
| Food Pantry Distribution | Number of clients, volunteers, and students participating and engaging with distribution and education opportunities. | Project Survey Assessment |
| Education Materials and Social Media Activities | Number of clients, volunteers, and students participating and engaging with distribution and education opportunities | Project Survey Assessment and Social Media Engagement |
| Strategic Plan Development | Results of Project Assessment, engagement, and other feedback. | Action Steps Created |