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Planting a Seed: United States and Florida Response to Coronavirus-19 Pandemic-Related Hunger

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Introduction

According to Wolfson and Leung (2020), food insecurity can be defined as inconsistent access to sufficient food to maintain health and well-being. Furthermore, poor nutritional intake is a possible risk factor for depression and anxiety in children, adolescents, and adults, and may contribute to the development of behavioral health problems. During the recent global pandemic, U.S. households reported greater difficulty finding food than experienced prior to the Coronavirus-19 (COVID-19) pandemic (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). The purpose of this article is to describe the United States and Florida response to addressing food shortages, as the federal government passed legislation approving to expedite the food assistance approval process for families during the pandemic. This legislation enabled flexibility in allocating Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) funds in response to the COVID-19 crisis. This article is directed toward social work practitioners to better understand COVID-related food insecurity issues in the U.S., subsequent federal legislative responses, and one state's solutions to pandemic food shortages from an ecological systems theoretical viewpoint with recommendations for further study.

From an ecological systems perspective, the availability of quality food impacts individual and societal well-being on multiple levels. According to Neal and Neal (2013), Urie Bronfenbrenner developed ecological systems theory (EST), which became widely acclaimed as a foundational theoretical framework for the study of individual behaviors within the context of the social environment. Bronfenbrenner's classification system is described as, "nested within one another" (p. 723) and operating at various levels within the social environment as the, "micro, meso, exo, macro, and chrono—based on patterns of social interaction" (Neal & Neal, 2013, p. 723). From an ecological systems viewpoint, these intersecting social circles provided the framework for the United States Federal response to the pandemic, thereby creating necessary resources and flexibility for individual states to adequately respond to the unique contextual environmental and relational factors and state-specific circumstances. States could determine the best methods for implementing changes and disseminating information on macro-level food assistance programs based on each state's population demographics, as well as the needs of urban and rural geographical areas. As noted by Lewis et al. (2019), possible resource barriers impacting vulnerable populations in times of emergency include environmental or situational obstacles, social status barriers, and unique community contextual circumstances.

From an ecological systemic viewpoint, at the micro-level, food insecurity and poor nutritional intake are possible risk factors for physical and behavioral health problems in children, adolescents and adults. Furthermore, as Leung et al., (2015) asserted the consequences of food insecurity may extend beyond individual physical health outcomes and might adversely impact mental health (p. 622). Likewise, Kinsey et al., (2019) noted the complex interrelationship between health, mental health and food security in self-management of various chronic physical and psychological conditions.

During the pandemic, the U.S. Census Bureau (2020) released initial findings of the Household Pulse Survey, which collected weekly data from July to September of 2020 on food insecurity. Results indicated that approximately 10% of U.S. households reported greater difficulty in finding food than prior to the pandemic and that at various points within any given week, an average of 24.9 million adults were uncertain from where they might obtain their next meal. These survey results, combined with Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) data, provided a snapshot of circumstances faced by U.S. households during the summer months of 2020.

In response to U.S. food shortages brought on by the pandemic, the federal government passed initial legislation in March of 2020, entitled “Families First Coronavirus Response Act” that approved state waivers which enabled state flexibility in allocating SNAP funds in response to the COVID-19 crisis. SNAP, administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), is the largest federal nutrition assistance program (Food Research and Action Center, 2021; Food and Nutrition Service, 2021) and is purported by Andreyeva, et al., (2015) to be “an effective component in reducing food insecurity in the U.S.” (p. 594). Prior to the pandemic, SNAP had proven to be a vital and effective source of food assistance, providing benefits to eligible recipients in order to make food available for those in need, thereby improving health and reducing poverty for millions in the U.S. (Keith-Jennings et al., 2019).

U.S. Food Insecurity: Pre- and During Pandemic

Although food insecurity is not a new phenomenon for lower income families in the U.S., the COVID-19 crisis brought food scarcity awareness to the general population. Wolfson and Leung (2020) expanded the definition of food insecurity to include “limited or uncertain access to sufficient, nutritious food for an active, healthy life” (p. 1763). According to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA, 2020), prior to the pandemic, 34.9% of U.S. households with incomes below the federal poverty index experienced food insecurity in 2019. More generally,

approximately 11-12% of all U.S. households reported food insecurity in the five pre-pandemic years leading up to December of 2017 (Coleman-Jenson et al., 2018; Wolfson & Leung, 2020). Subsequent to the onset of the pandemic, researchers Fitzpatrick, Harris and Drawve (2020), estimated that as of April of 2020, U.S. food insecurity had increased to approximately 38% among households with incomes of less than 250% of the current federal poverty index level (Wolfson and Leung, 2020). Moreover, Wolfson and Leung (2020) stated national public health survey findings revealing that early in the pandemic, “44% of all households were food insecure, including 48% of Black households, 52% of Hispanic households, and 54% of households with children” (p. 1763).

U. S. Federal Response to Pandemic Food Shortages

To alleviate stress for U.S. households brought on by COVID-19 food shortages, the Federal government passed two important legislative responses which set the stage for individual states to make immediate and sweeping temporary benefit changes for food assistance program recipients during the COVID-19 emergency. This initial Federal macro-level response entitled, The Families First Coronavirus Response Act of March, 2020, provided states temporary authority to modify procedures for families’ participation or application for food assistance through the SNAP. This Federal legislation approved individual state waivers suspending income verification and expanding eligibility timeframes to expedite program access during the pandemic, thus enabling individual states to exercise greater flexibility in allocating existing SNAP funds in response to the COVID-19 crisis and also addressing various barriers to food safety net access for families in need (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2021). This legislative response involved implementing temporary Pandemic-Electronic Benefits Transfer (P-EBT) cards for families during this time of emergency, including a benefit increase of 15% per person per month for recipients. With school closures, monies that would have been allocated to school meal programs were redirected for family meal programs using P-EBT cards during the pandemic. To implement this P-EBT program, states were free to design infrastructure and staffing which aligned with their state needs, as well as create new state-level policies to govern the program. States did bear half of administrative costs to implement this pandemic electronic benefits program.

Subsequent to The Families First Coronavirus Act of March, 2020, Congress extended benefits legislation in March of 2021 with the passage of a second Federal legislative response entitled, The American Rescue Plan Act of 2021. Among other things, this act extended the Federal Child Nutrition Program through the end of the summer of 2021 to be operated

through and alongside SNAP (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2021). The American Rescue Plan Act (2021) extended P-EBT program benefits as well as a 15% increase (an average increase of \$27 per person per month), expanding SNAP online purchasing, and investing \$880 million to increase access to fruits and vegetables for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program recipients (Food and Nutrition Services, 2021).

Common Obstacles to Food Assistance Program Participation Prior to COVID-19

In the months prior to the pandemic, researcher, Cohen (2019), examined neighborhood characteristics and SNAP participation in New York. His findings identified common areas of concern on SNAP participation in general as related to Florida's problems of food accessibility as the pandemic ensued. He also provided recommendations on the importance of understanding how community dynamics, characteristics, and proximity to service centers impact both access to affordable groceries and SNAP participation for eligible individuals. Some common barriers to SNAP participation identified by Cohen (2019) included lengthy application and recertification processes, various language barriers, literacy concerns, questionable customer service at available centers, inadequate or unavailable helpful information on SNAP benefits, applicant/recipient fear of interacting with government officials, and overall stigma of utilizing public assistance. Cohen (2019) further recommended several critical improvements needed for increasing SNAP participation among eligible non-participants, such as tracking SNAP demographics and usage metrics in various geographical areas, intentional community outreach strategies for remote and marginalized communities, providing support for those most vulnerable for job loss, and providing fully accessible online application process with automated reminders for call-in or online recertifications. Cohen identified these critical missing infrastructure links in New York SNAP in 2019, just prior to the global pandemic, therefore it is no surprise that the greater U.S. found itself set back on its heels in the wake of the subsequent global pandemic in terms of getting critically needed food assistance program expansions rolled out to the masses in short order during the early months of 2020.

Florida's Implementation of Strategies to Combat Pandemic-Related Hunger

At the federal macro level, the U.S. government provides state guidelines for receiving federal monies to administer SNAP, and in the wake of the pandemic, provided temporary flexibility to states in their response to pandemic-related hunger. The Florida Department of

Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS, 2021) is the reporting agency on issues of food insecurity impacts among various racial, ethnic and economic groups, with particular focus on Florida's children. According to the Florida Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability (OPPAGA, 2021), Florida ranks above the national average among states in terms of households experiencing food insecurity.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture required that states respond rapidly to secure food for needy households, especially those with children. Subsequent to Federal Families First Coronavirus Response Act legislation, Florida received approval and moved quickly to pass the expanded Pandemic-Electronic Benefits Transfer (P-EBT) on May 27, 2020 with their action plan formulated. Recognizing the need to ensure healthy food choices for Florida households during the pandemic, as well as the critical importance of keeping the agricultural economy afloat for farmers, Florida lawmakers opened pathways for collaboration between state and local entities, while adhering to CDC guidelines, in order to preserve health and safety for delivery mechanisms and distribution. Florida's economic pandemic response then occurred in three rounds with strategic rolling-out of P-EBT benefits at various quarterly timeframes as reported by the Urban Institute's State-by-State EBT Plans report (2021). The Urban Institute (2021) reported that this program was highly successful in addressing child hunger among families that experienced job losses during the pandemic with nearly 2.2 million P-EBT cards distributed in Florida during 2020.

Similarly, Florida Impact to End Hunger, established in 1979, collaborates with community leaders to address hunger by making public policies and program deliveries more responsive to the needs of households at the community level (Florida Impact to End Hunger, 2021). For example, in Miami-Dade County alone, nearly 300,000 individuals struggled with food insecurity prior to the pandemic, and that number almost tripled during the COVID-19 crisis (Feeding Florida, 2021). In addressing food insecurity during the pandemic, Florida Impact to End Hunger worked to locate consistent and reliable resources for those impacted during this global crisis, including P-EBT information, web links, and expanding state-level 2-1-1, a state-funded dial-in and online information network, on a variety of topics to help individuals and families. Additionally, the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, Keep Florida Growing program expanded during the pandemic to include Florida's Farm to You Commodities List, "to connect potential buyers with farmers and producers of Florida-grown commodities like

fresh produce, seafood, poultry and more. Buyers, food banks and consumers can directly connect with growers selling these products using contact information on the list” (Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, Keep Florida Growing, 2021).

Meeting the nutritional needs of Florida’s families during the COVID-19 pandemic required rapidly evolving program changes and expansions of existing policies at both the macro- and mezzo-levels within the state system, incorporating collaborative inter-agency partnerships and expansions of existing larger state-level programs. Feeding Florida (2021), a network of Florida’s food banks, supports more than 2,400 local charitable food distribution sites across the state and oversees the Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive (FINI), a grant-based program administered through the USDA, which in turn supports Florida’s Fresh Access Bucks (FAB) program. Feeding Florida works continuously to ensure consistent community-level access to healthy food. Consistent with an ecological systems perspective, structural program changes, initiatives, and innovative processes that Florida implemented or expanded to meet COVID-19 food insecurity issues ranged from macro-level programs, such as Farmers Feeding Florida (2021) and Fresh Access Bucks (Feeding Florida, 2021) to more local mezzo-level mobile pantries, food banks, and grocery stores.

Finally, Florida’s pandemic response addressing food insecurity largely emulated the SNAP program recommendations in New York posited by Cohen (2019) in the months preceding the global pandemic outbreak. According to the Florida’s Policy Institute COVID Response Tracker (2021), as of May of 2021, Florida had instituted the following food assistance changes during 2020-2021: (1) Emergency SNAP allotments and 15% increase in monthly benefits for SNAP recipients; (2) P-EBT benefits for SNAP eligible households with children impacted by reduced school hours or school closures; (3) Suspension of program time limits and work requirements as prior to pandemic; and (4) Waivers for SNAP participants to purchase groceries online.

Recommendations

Recommendations include program evaluations at macro- and mezzo-levels of governmental programs to more localized, community-level initiatives to identify obstacles and successful outcomes. Further exploration and assessment of program applications is suggested in order to identify successful implementation strategies and effective and sustainable solutions which can endure in a post-COVID-19 era. Additionally, acquiring input from various stakeholders at multiple levels and evaluating other states’ initiatives may prove valuable in meeting

ongoing post-COVID-19 era nutritional needs to create new sustainable food assistance initiatives. Effective implementation strategies need not be confined to this crisis, but instead form a path for meeting ongoing nutritional needs in years to come.

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