

Lessons from the COVID-19 Experience: Innovations and Strategies for Farm to Early Care and Education Implementation in States and Communities

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As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, many food and early childhood organizations involved in the farm to early care and education (farm to ECE) movement shifted their 2020 priorities to address critical needs of families with young children. The past year has marked a time of collective struggle and resilience as communities grappled with the impacts of a global pandemic, economic crisis, and a renewed national focus on advancing racial equity. At the same time, many organizations took advantage of the flexibilities offered to them by changes in federal policy, filled gaps where the system was not working, and adapted their farm to ECE models to be successful in the new context. Out of the crisis emerged innovations for farm to ECE delivery that have propelled the movement forward.

Farm to ECE initiatives enhance the quality of ECE settings by increasing access to local foods, hands-on gardening, and food and agriculture education for children and families. Farm to ECE encourages the development of healthy behaviors in young children while supporting robust and equitable community-based food systems. With support from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, food and ECE partner organizations in Georgia, Iowa, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin are working together to scale farm to ECE across their respective states. Since 2016, the partner organizations in each state have gained significant traction in expanding their farm to ECE movements by adopting a collective action model, which involves the strategic collaboration of a team of core partners from the state's food and ECE systems. As the states have moved the work forward, these core partners established a clear process for working together to achieve collective goals, such as elevating the benefits of farm to ECE, building capacity of the local food procurement infrastructure, and supporting policy changes at the state level.

In June and July 2020, each of these five state partnerships held a set of virtual site visits with the W.K. Kellogg Foundation to offer a snapshot of how their work and partnerships were impacted as a result of COVID-19. Using information from these site visits, this brief documents the systemic impacts of COVID-19 and the federal response from a farm to ECE perspective; describes how farm to ECE partner organizations adapted to the new context during the initial months of the pandemic; and provides recommendations for how states and communities can sustain the successful innovations implemented during the pandemic.

Systemic Impacts on Farm to ECE

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted systems that are foundational to the implementation of farm to ECE models. While these models vary across states and communities, successful efforts involve strategic collaborations across the food and early childhood systems to help ECE providers in procuring local foods, establishing gardens, and providing nutrition and agriculture education. The food and early childhood systems have been negatively affected by the pandemic and challenged by the accompanying public health measures (i.e., social distancing). At the same time, crisis gives birth to innovation, and the innovative responses to the pandemic provide an opportunity to move the field forward. In addition, communities are facing a host of other factors—from an economic crisis to a national racial justice movement—that have affected farm to ECE systems, partners, and priorities. This section of the brief provides additional context on each of these factors and their impact on farm to ECE.

Impact on food systems

The COVID-19 emergency laid bare the vulnerabilities and inequities in the food system and elevated the fact that current global and national distribution models are not sustainable. When restaurants, schools, universities, and other institutions closed, producers and distributors were left with a glut of product and limited capacity to shift distribution channels. At the same time, increased

retail demand and shifting shopping patterns left grocery shelves empty in the early days of the pandemic. This lack of flexibility in food supply chains was brought to the forefront as images of farmers dumping milk and turning under loads of vegetables were featured in [popular media](#). Disruptions in the meat industry offer a particularly salient example of the compounded challenges in the system. Limited precautionary measures and systemic labor issues in industrial meat processing plants set the stage for [mass COVID-19 outbreaks](#) in these plants and subsequent shutdowns. Small processing facilities were inundated with more demand than they have capacity for, and most animal producers had no outlet for processing. Outbreaks and supply disruptions like this occurred across agriculture sectors. The consumer price index for food at home and away from home increased dramatically in 2020, due largely to COVID disruptions, and costs are anticipated to [continue rising through 2021](#). The viability of producers across production sectors and the reverberating impacts of production losses continue to be a concern. USDA's Economic Research Service anticipates U.S. net farm income will fall nearly 10% in 2021, signaling longer term disruptions and inconsistency for producers.

Supply disruptions have prompted increased interest in local and regional food systems. In some areas of the country, [direct-from-producer and community supported agriculture](#) (CSA) purchases have surged. While some small, locally focused producers have been able to pivot to meet this demand, it has come with increased costs as they adapt production, distribution, and sales. Economic losses from local and regional markets from March to May 2020 alone are estimated at [\\$1.32 billion](#). As COVID-19 cases and closures continue to impact institutional purchasing and consumer behavior, long-term impacts and system shifts are still unclear.

Impact on ECE systems

ECE providers have been on the frontlines of the pandemic as a critical work support for families with young children. As states declared public health emergencies and released guidance about which services were deemed “essential,” [emergency child care provisions](#) were issued to allow some child care programs to remain open to serve the families of essential workers, requiring group size limitations, social distancing, and other health and safety measures.

These closures and subsequent uncertainty about when and how to safely reopen are dramatically impacting the long-term sustainability of the ECE system. The burden of offering safe, high-quality care has always fallen on ECE providers, due to [inadequate financing](#) and reliance on parent pay/private tuition. While federal COVID-19 relief bills have provided increasing amounts of funding for child care, serious concerns remain about the long-term stability of the child care system if a permanent financing solution for child care is not developed.

Economic context

The economic crisis that has accompanied the pandemic has resulted in a rise in unemployment and state and local budget shortfalls, with direct impacts on families with young children. These factors have contributed to the further destabilization of an already under-resourced ECE system that largely depends on families to cover the cost of care. Budget deficits at the state and local level can also have long-term impacts on child care resources, while unemployment and income losses will increase the number of families in need of emergency food assistance. Researchers estimate that state revenues in fiscal year 2021 could [drop 10.8%](#) compared to pre-pandemic governors' budget proposals, which could result in cuts to things like K-12 education spending, public health programs, and transportation across many states.

Nationally, real gross domestic product (GDP) fell at an annual rate of [32.9% in the second quarter of 2020](#), a rate greater than both the Great Depression and the Great Recession. Unemployment reached a high point in [April 2020 at 14.8%](#), and in January 2021 was reported at 6.3%, still significantly higher than pre-pandemic figures. In comparison, unemployment during the 2008 Great Recession peaked at 10.3% in 2010, two years from the start of the recession. Research shows that women, people of color, low-wage, and less-educated workers were disproportionately impacted by COVID-related unemployment. The number of active small businesses dropped by [3.3 million \(22%\)](#), the largest on record, and disproportionately impacted Black (41%), Latinx (32%), immigrant (36%), and women (25%) business owners.

Families and their children have experienced an amplified economic burden from the COVID-19 pandemic. Across the country, about [1 in 5 adult renters](#) (13 million adults) were behind on last month's rent as of February 2021, with 25% of households living with children under the age of 18 behind on rent compared to 13% of households without children. Overall food insecurity has also continued to grow throughout the country in response to economic hardships brought on by the pandemic as compared to pre-pandemic rates. Reports from February found higher rates of [food insecurity](#) in households with children (14%) compared to households without children (10%). Rates of food insecurity were almost two times higher for Black (20%) and Latinx (18%) households compared to White households (8%). Nationally, over [one in four children](#) are in a household that is food insecure or behind on rent or mortgage payments. Almost every state has seen an [increase in SNAP participants](#), with a national average increase of about 17% (6-7 million people) from February 2020–February 2021.

Increased investment through federal stimulus packages

A series of federal aid packages approved throughout the pandemic aimed to address the heightening economic crisis and included targeted measures for producers, Child Nutrition Programs, and ECE systems. These interventions aimed to bolster and prevent further devastation to the foundational systems that farm to ECE relies upon and to meet the immediate needs of producers and families of young children. The Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) included direct payments to producers ([Coronavirus Food Assistance Program](#)) and a novel program to purchase excess product from producers and redistribute to families in need ([Farmers to Families Food Box Program](#)). The program paved the way for local food distribution to families through ECE sites in some communities. However, reported success and efficacy of these initiatives were mixed. The awards for the Farmers to Families Food Box Program were [controversial](#), the program did not meet [distribution aims](#), and the federal aid programs offered limited benefits for [farmers of color, beginning farmers, and first-generation farmers](#).

FFCRA also introduced [flexibilities for USDA Child Nutrition Programs](#) through a series of program waivers. Nationwide waivers included flexibilities in meal-time, meal pattern, congregate feeding, and parent/guardian pick-up of meals for the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), School Breakfast Program (SBP), Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), Seamless Summer Option (SSO), and the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP). Other waivers exempted CACFP programs from certain administrative requirements, including on-site monitoring and annual review requirements. The waivers opened the opportunity for innovative service models, including grab-and-go meals or meal delivery, to continue to get food to young children during child care closures. However, despite the flexibilities applied to CACFP, most [ECE sites did not have capacity to implement modified food services approaches](#) for a variety of reasons, including providers' limited financial resources, infrastructure, and staff capacity to administer the program.

Two important waivers related to the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and Seamless Summer Option (SSO) expanded opportunities to connect families to meals. The "Summer Meals Operations" waiver allowed school districts and other operating sites to offer meals during school closures using SFSP/SSO. The "Area Eligibility" waiver allowed SFSP/SSO to operate outside of "areas in which poor economic conditions exist," which open service sites are restricted to under normal circumstances. Under SFSP and SSO, open service sites can offer meals at no cost to any children under the age of 18. SFSP and SSO feeding sites became important access points for meals for young children. It is important to note that these modified service models rely heavily on pre-packed and individually wrapped items, creating additional barriers to offering fresh, local food products.

The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act included [ECE funding provisions](#) to help states, territories, and tribes respond to the needs of families and early childhood programs. The stimulus package included \$3.5 billion in Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) funding for assistance to child care providers. Many states used these supplemental dollars to subsidize child care for essential workers or to help providers offset the revenue lost from serving fewer children or complete closure during the spring and summer months. As they are considered discretionary funds, there was no state match requirement and the income eligibility requirement normally tied to CCDBG funding was waived. In addition, the CARES Act included \$750 million for Head Start programs, \$500 million of which was intended for summer Head Start programs, and the remainder to help programs respond to pandemic-related needs of children and families. (See Appendix A for more detailed information regarding federal relief legislation.)

In December 2020, the [Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act, 2021](#) (CRRSA Act) was passed, with the goal of extending relief funding to families, schools, and businesses while allocating additional resources to state and local governments to assist in pandemic response and recovery efforts. As part of the \$900 billion stimulus package's early childhood provisions, states received \$10 billion in supplemental CCDBG funding, which could be used to cover child care costs for families and stabilize the overall sector, along with an additional \$250 million to help Head Start and Early Head Start programs with their pandemic response. Key provisions for the food system and child nutrition included an expansion of the Coronavirus Food Assistance Program, an additional \$75 million to incentivize the purchasing of local fruits and vegetables by SNAP recipients, a change in eligibility for Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer to include children under age six, and an extension of emergency funding payments and reimbursements for CACFP.

Finally, Congress passed the [American Rescue Plan Act of 2021](#) (ARP Act) in March 2021, which included a total of \$39 billion in additional child care funding for states and territories. Of this amount, nearly \$24 billion will be used towards the stabilization of child care programs, and can be used to cover a range of operating expenses such as personnel costs, rent, facility maintenance and improvements, personal protective equipment (PPE) and COVID-related supplies, mental health supports, and other goods and services needed to resume child care services. The \$15 billion in expanded child care assistance funds will flow through the CCDBG program and can be used to meet the needs of families and ECE providers, including supporting the child care needs of essential workers.

Equity context

The necessity and importance of equity-centered approaches to farm to ECE have been reinforced by the unprecedented national awareness of and reckoning with deeply rooted systemic racism in the U.S. Communities of color have been disproportionately burdened by COVID-19, not only with its health impacts, but also its economic repercussions. COVID-19 cases have disproportionately impacted [Black, Latinx, and American Indian/Alaskan Native](#) people across the country, who have a nearly three times greater rate of hospitalization and two times greater death rate than White, non-Hispanic people. Communities of color are also more severely impacted by the [economic impacts](#) of COVID-19, such as unemployment, loss of health insurance, and food and housing insecurity. As communities navigated this disaster, the unconscionable [murder of George Floyd](#), an unarmed Black man, by a White Minneapolis police officer while in police custody horrified the nation and set off a global response. Protests and demonstrations across the world called for an end to police brutality against Black people and demanded change in racist systems that have allowed and promoted persistent and pervasive violence against people of color. Americans, some for the first time, were forced to look deeply at the social structures and systems that perpetuate racism and the role that ambivalence and silence plays in systematically disempowering people of color. The sense of urgency around racial equity has only grown over the past year and is a key priority under the Biden-Harris administration, with the signing of an [executive order](#) to advance racial equity and support underserved communities through the federal government.

The virtual site visits—which occurred between June and July 2020—captured data at the height of racial tensions. In their site visits, all of the state partnerships acknowledged how the climate at that time spurred additional conversations and actions to promote racial equity, including increased racial equity trainings for their staff or in their coalitions and increased emphasis on programming that explicitly aims to address racial inequities. Several states acknowledged that while equity has always been foundational to their farm to ECE work, they recognize the need to continue and deepen their commitment to it.

Innovation and Adaptations in Farm to ECE

Trends that emerged in the COVID-19 context

While the public health crisis brought multiple challenges and heightened existing inequities in communities, it also provided an opportunity for those engaged in farm to ECE to show the value of the movement by shifting priorities and leveraging existing relationships with food and ECE systems to meet the pressing needs of farmers, ECE providers, and families. For example, families who suddenly found themselves with young children at home had a greater need for virtual learning strategies to teach their children in the home environment. Teachers working in ECE programs that closed their doors showed an increased readiness to engage

in virtual farm to ECE professional development opportunities. Many of these providers and families also expressed an increased interest in gardening and outdoor learning activities that are aligned with social distancing guidelines. Similarly, farmers, food supply chain partners, and consumers were more likely to use technology, many for the first time, to sell or purchase local food, giving rise to increased online procurement and its accompanying infrastructure in many states.

These behavioral shifts, coupled with the increased flexibility of federal policy and programs, allowed many food and ECE organizations to explore innovations in their approaches to providing healthy, local food to young children in their states. See **Figure 1** for a summary of farm to ECE impacts, opportunities, and key themes of innovation in the COVID-19 environment.

Increased readiness for virtual learning and professional development

As more ECE and school sites closed due to state stay-at-home orders, farm to ECE partners saw an increased need for and participation in virtual learning for children and professional development opportunities for ECE programs. This increased readiness to engage online allowed organizations to expand the reach of their farm to ECE training and technical assistance resources. Several partners increased utilization of various web-based platforms for virtual technical assistance and learning. For example, North Carolina used Facebook and Zoom for virtual learning sessions with ECE providers (see North Carolina box below) and Georgia created YouTube videos for farm to ECE lessons that can be used with children in the home environment. Iowa created online lessons for teachers to use and share with families, and Wisconsin used technology for peer support groups of ECE providers along with training videos to support farm to ECE. Pennsylvania promoted Keystone Kids Go online learning modules for Head Start programs and also led virtual lessons (pre-recorded and “live”) on different platforms to continue elevating farm to ECE with programs during the pandemic. Several state partners also reported shifting farm to ECE coalition/task force meetings online to maintain communication and coordinate information.

Increased interest in gardening and outdoor learning

The initial COVID-19 peak and shutdowns coincided with the spring planting season in many areas of the country. Gardening and outdoor learning emerged as a solution to challenges in adapting to COVID-19-related policies and restrictions. At ECE sites that remained open, gardening and outdoor learning was an engaging activity that allowed for appropriate physical distancing. For closed sites, gardening offered a way to continue to engage with families. In North Carolina, ECE sites utilized staff time during closures to build and prepare gardens. Head Start sites with existing gardens offered families access to the gardens, providing an outdoor escape and resource for fresh food. The Iowa team also reported increased interest in gardening in ECE/school sites across the state. The Northeast Iowa Food and Fitness Initiative offered free seeds to sites early in the spring to help meet this demand. Iowa child care sites that remained open were serving fewer children and had more time to spend outside with children in the garden. Wisconsin has also seen a greater emphasis on outdoor learning, including designing outdoor spaces for education. In Georgia, ECE sites increasingly recognized the value and benefit of outdoor learning, a change that will hopefully last beyond the immediate COVID-19 response. Georgia Organics partnered with a Head Start program in Columbus to include farm to ECE resources in food boxes that were distributed to over 400 families. The resources included seed packets, handouts with planting instructions, and ECE educational activities.

North Carolina: Delivering Virtual Farm to ECE Training through “Learning Burst” Series

With in-person training sessions no longer a possibility, the North Carolina Farm to ECE Collaborative developed a series of virtual trainings called “Learning Bursts.” These one-hour Learning Burst sessions cover a wide range of topics including gardening and composting “how-to’s,” curriculum, social-emotional learning, and racial equity. National and local partners have offered content and presentations, including a series of training from county Extension agents. The Collaborative offered the engaging, interactive sessions on a weekly basis to participants and their networks and have seen a huge response, with as many as 180 attendees—double the number of Collaborative participants—attending the live sessions. Over 30 Learning Bursts were offered since March 2020 and a library of the recordings is available on the Collaborative website. For more information, see: https://cefs.ncsu.edu/resource_category/learning-bursts/

FIGURE 1: Farm to ECE Impacts, Trends, and Key Themes of Innovation in the COVID-19 Environment



Increased use of technology and online purchasing platforms

The COVID-19 emergency caused considerable disruptions in food supply chains. It also prompted innovation and creativity on the part of producers and producer support organizations who had to pivot quickly to shift market outlets and find new ways to get products to consumers. Online platforms for aggregating and the sale of local foods were a natural solution to meet the needs of producers and consumers. In Iowa, team members leveraged existing infrastructure and relationships to develop robust “virtual farm stands.” The virtual platform saw a significant uptick in orders and usage through the spring of 2020. The platform has been utilized for a “Little People, Little Orders” pilot program that allows ECE sites to order smaller amounts of product (see Iowa box below). In Wisconsin, individual producers and farmers markets have shifted to allow pre-ordering for drive-through pick-up or delivery through online platforms and apps. Pennsylvania farmers markets have made similar shifts. These measures have promoted consistent outlets for producers and eased some barriers of time commitment and access for ECE providers and families while adhering to safety protocols and restrictions. Georgia Organics provided financial and technical assistance support for producers to help them make the shift to online sales. An emerging virtual opportunity is the growing number of states approved for the online SNAP virtual purchasing pilot. Currently only Amazon and Walmart are approved vendors for the program in most states, but there are active advocacy efforts at the state and federal levels to expand eligible markets to local producers. While increased online access may open up opportunities for some, inequitable access to internet and technology, limited technology literacy, and language barriers may limit beneficiaries of this innovation. As a result, both producers and consumers (including ECE sites and providers) with limited technology access and capacity may be shut out of the platform.

Increased flexibility of federal policy and regulations

Increased flexibility in federal programs allowed ECE systems and communities to respond to meet the needs of families and communities during the COVID-19 crisis. As noted, federal waivers for Child Nutrition Programs allowed for alternative service models and created an opportunity for children to access meals even when ECE sites were closed. Allowing for non-congregate feeding, parent pick-up, and meal-time waivers enabled some ECE sites to offer grab-and-go meals for families and some, including Head Start programs in Pennsylvania, to set up direct delivery of meals to families. However, shifting service models was challenging for many sites and left a [major gap in reach](#). Fewer than 50% of responding CACFP sponsors reported utilizing programmatic waivers during the spring of 2020. More impactful for families with young children were the early opening and flexibilities of the Summer Food Service Program/Seamless Summer Option, which allowed these programs to offer meals to any child under the age of 18 regardless of income eligibility. SFSP/SSO was the [primary way young children were receiving meals](#) during COVID-19 related closures. This fluidity across Child Nutrition Programs and access points was vital to supporting family access to meals. As of this writing, nationwide Child Nutrition Program waivers have been extended through June 30, 2021.

Flexibility in ECE funding streams also offered benefits to ECE sites. Several CCDBG funding requirements were waived through the CARES Act, and continued through CRRSA and the ARP Act. These waivers included income eligibility requirements and minimum spending requirements on direct child care and quality improvement efforts. Funds were also allowed to be used for sanitation or to maintain child care services regardless of whether they served children receiving subsidies prior to the COVID-19 crisis. These flexi-

Iowa: Facilitating Local Food Access for ECE Sites through “Little People, Little Orders” Pilot

When COVID-19 shut down institutional markets, producers were left with abundant product and limited distribution outlets. The Iowa Food Hub Network saw the need from producers and the demand from consumers and responded quickly. They helped producers shift to a virtual “farmers market” where producers could sell their products and consumers could shop and order local food for “no-contact” pick-up or delivery. With the online marketplace more robust than ever, farm to ECE partners in Iowa saw another opportunity to connect ECE sites to this virtual purchasing opportunity. The “Little People, Little Orders” pilot was developed to maximize the aggregation and infrastructure of the food hub with a specialized platform that allows ECE sites to order only the amount of product they need, without minimum purchase or delivery requirements. Iowa partners anticipate that this innovation will continue and that the ease of the online ordering system will benefit both producers and ECE sites in the long term.

bilities allowed state agencies to more quickly distribute funds to ECE sites that remained open to serve essential workers, instead of having to be associated with an individual child eligible for child care subsidies. This also allowed ECE sites to maintain funding needed for basic operations even as attendance and participation dropped sharply. Additionally, flexibilities offered through the Office of Head Start allowed Head Start sites to continue to pay staff, offer meals, and creatively meet the needs of families even when Head Start programs were not physically open for operations.

Key themes of innovation across W.K. Kellogg Foundation farm to ECE state partnerships

The farm to ECE partnerships in Georgia, Iowa, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin include a set of core partners from both the food and ECE systems, including ECE providers, farmers, food hubs, and food systems and ECE capacity-building and advocacy organizations. The virtual site visits offered a snapshot of their work and how the partnerships were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. This section highlights the key themes of innovation that emerged during the site visits.

Leveraging existing relationships in food and ECE systems

Since 2016, the partner organizations in each state have gained significant traction in expanding their farm to ECE movements by adopting a collective action model, which includes the strategic collaboration of core partners from the state's food and ECE systems. As the states have moved the work forward, these core partners established a clear process for working together to achieve collective goals, such as elevating the benefits of farm to ECE, building capacity of the local food procurement infrastructure, and supporting policy changes at the state level.

As a result of these collective efforts to build farm to ECE capacity before COVID-19, the five state teams were able to effectively respond in the wake of a growing crisis because the principles of cohesion and strategic collaboration were already established. These principles allowed the partner organizations to remain steady in their communications and shift their farm to ECE work to meet the emergent needs of their communities. For example, Iowa's collaboration between the food system and ECE partners was integral to connecting producers and ECE providers to their virtual farmstand. It also allowed them to extend the mini-grant timeline for ECE sites that were not able to spend their funding before the closures that took place in March 2020.

There was also a natural focus among partners to leverage existing relationships rather than build new ones, which can be challenging in a virtual environment. For example, North Carolina spoke about its ability to leverage current relationships with Head Start programs, local food policy councils, and county Extension Office partners to successfully expand the frequency and scope of its Learning Burst training opportunities for a larger virtual audience (see North Carolina box above). Others spoke about the value of peer learning and regular check-in calls among ECE providers implementing farm to ECE to reconnect during the crisis.

Increasing communication and resource sharing

In the initial weeks of the pandemic, many state teams shifted their focus to prioritize the more immediate needs of families and communities by helping to disseminate information to their community partners and align with the efforts of emergency food organizations in their communities. Many partners were able to sift through the various government resources and policy updates being released—for example, the location of emergency feeding sites or how to access CARES Act funding—and helped to disseminate them to their local organizations and communities. These resources included information on school and ECE program closures, health and safety guidelines, stimulus funding, and other changes that impacted food and ECE systems.

Connecting across local food and emergency food organizations

State partners also spoke about strategic engagement with emergency food organizations to help meet the growing nutrition security needs of their community, while in some cases supporting local producers at the same time. Many focused on connecting ECE sites with emergency food programs to serve families with young children. For example, Iowa farm to ECE partners collaborated with food hubs and pantries to find and deliver local products for grab-and-go meals, shifting emergency food distribution directly to families at closed school/ECE sites. Wisconsin partners worked with their Child Care Resource & Referral agency to establish a system that delivers emergency food to ECE sites weekly, with a focus on low-income commu-

Wisconsin: Leveraging Relationships with Food Rescue Organizations to Donate Food and Reduce Waste

The COVID-19 crisis and economic fallout have given rise to stronger and more creative relationships between emergency food assistance programs and early care and education sites. Kids Forward in Wisconsin developed relationships with a food rescue and gleaning organization to create a pilot program to deliver high-quality food to families that have limited access to fresh, local food. Gleaning is a form of food rescue that involves harvesting crops that would otherwise remain in the field after the commercial harvest or that would not be harvested because it is not economically beneficial to do so. State emergency funds provided compensation to farmers while other producers donated food that would have otherwise gone to waste. Each week, Kids Forward delivered 50 bags of food, including local eggs, bread, turnips, spinach, and other produce, to six ECE sites where local families picked up the bags to take home. Families expressed extreme appreciation for the fresh food. “This food makes me feel human again,” said one participant.

nities in Madison. The state piloted a gleaning program to ensure that food that would otherwise go to waste is distributed to ECE sites and families (see Wisconsin box).

Despite being closed during the summer, Head Start programs continued to serve a critical function by addressing the immediate needs of the families they serve. Although federal waivers were not yet made available for non-congregate food distribution sites for Head Start programs participating in the Child and Adult Care Food Program, several Pennsylvania Head Start sites were able to coordinate with public schools to pick up and distribute food to families (see Pennsylvania box below). Little Ones Learning Center,

an ECE provider in Georgia, served as a food distribution site for the community by working with Common Market, a regional food distributor, through the federal Farmers to Families Food Box program.

Expansion of local food program pilots to introduce farm to ECE concepts to families

Potentially due to the increase in online purchasing platforms as well as specific federal investment programs, interest in and demand for community supported agriculture (CSA) and local food boxes have accelerated amid the COVID-19 crisis. ECE sites have been vital distribution points for food, and many CSAs or food box programs have brought fresh, local food into the homes of families with young children. Iowa reports that a growing number of producers are entering the CSA market to meet increased demand in the state. In Wisconsin, Kids Forward leveraged funds to sponsor CSAs for five sites in the La Crosse area. The program provided an opportunity to support local producers while supplying centers and the children they serve with fresh, local products. Continuing to provide children with fresh foods has been a challenge, as sites face the combination of severe financial constraints and supply chain disruptions. The Wisconsin team also launched a “mini-CSA” that brings boxes of produce from the farmers market into eleven ECE sites once a month in an effort to bolster sales at the local farmers market while connecting children and families to local foods. Georgia has leveraged state and federal supports to get Georgia-grown products into food boxes and into the hands of Georgia families. Georgia Grown, a division of the Georgia Department of Agriculture, distributed boxes featuring products from larger farms in southern Georgia in several cities across the state. The Common Market was an awardee of the Farmers to Families Food Box program and distributed food boxes through non-profit sites across the Southeast, including ECE locations. Little Ones Learning Center was one such distribution site in Georgia, with

Pennsylvania: Leveraging Partnerships to Increase Food Access for Families with Young Children

Amid closures, ECE sites and families in Pennsylvania leveraged alternate food distribution and access opportunities. Thanks to USDA waivers, school districts in Pennsylvania were able to offer grab-and-go meals to all children under age 18. Some districts partnered with Head Start sites to promote these opportunities and ensure Head Start students had access to no-cost meals during Head Start closures. The Food Trust’s farmers markets also became increasingly important food access points for families relying on SNAP benefits. As essential businesses, farmers markets were able to remain open even during COVID-19 business closures. The Food Trust shared information with ECE sites about the opening of farmers markets, including safety practices at the markets, through an ECE network and through outreach to local partner sites. They distributed nutrition incentives (“food bucks”) to ECE sites for families to use at the markets. During the COVID-19 crisis, the Food Trust saw dramatic growth in attendance at farmers markets and an even more dramatic increase in the use of SNAP benefits at the markets. SNAP purchases were 325% higher in May 2020 compared to May 2019. Seeing partnering organizations come together to promote these food access opportunities demonstrates how integrated partnerships can increase the reach of community benefits and connect families of young children to important food access points.

nearly 500 families picking up farm-fresh food boxes from the site on a weekly basis. These pilot approaches not only address the immediate need of families, but provide models to consider for future expansion.

Layering funding sources to support broader goals of farm to ECE

In these times of uncertainty, it is even more critical for farm to ECE partners to be strategic and find ways to incorporate farm to ECE into their state's infrastructure in order to sustain their efforts for the long term. Many of the partner organizations across the five states highlighted their approach to diversifying funding to sustain their farm to ECE models. For example, several teams are pursuing collaborative fundraising strategies to track and take advantage of various philanthropic opportunities that have emerged with a focus on promoting equity and/or child health and wellness.

State partners also report efforts to layer funding from federal, state, and local sources to deepen connections between local food and ECE systems and support the broader goals of farm to ECE, including emergency response efforts. For example, in Wisconsin, state leaders committed \$15 million from funding received through the Coronavirus Food Assistance Program toward local food, while at the local level, counties are purchasing local food for distribution to families in need. The Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture is offering a relief fund as part of its Pennsylvania Fresh Food Financing Initiative to support food retailing businesses impacted by COVID-19, prioritizing those that are owned by or serve Black, Indigenous, and people of color to ensure communities continue to have access to healthy food during the crisis. Georgia's partners collaborated with other community organizations to provide stabilization grants to ECE providers to help them stay afloat during the pandemic (see Georgia box below).

Summary of farm to ECE innovations and adaptations

While we still cannot fully comprehend the extent and duration of repercussions of the COVID-19 emergency on ECE and food systems, we do have the opportunity to reflect on the innovations and adaptations that have emerged during this time. The sustainability of the farm to ECE movement is tied to the strength of the underlying food and ECE systems. These modifications can offer lessons of resilience and may reveal programs, policies, and approaches that have enabled farm to ECE to continue during COVID-19 and could strengthen farm to ECE in the recovery and beyond. States and communities should explore ways to sustain the following practices as they continue to build capacity for farm to ECE during the recovery phase of the pandemic as well as for the long term.

Increase state and community capacity to implement virtual trainings and online purchasing

The pandemic has accelerated efforts to leverage technology for various aspects of farm to ECE. By moving training and professional development opportunities to virtual platforms, state agencies and partner organizations expanded their reach. For example, these virtual platforms increased participation in workshops and trainings, including those on racial equity, while eliminating the need to travel for attendees. Expansion of virtual marketplaces opened new markets to producers and new access points for local food for some ECE providers. Continuing use of these virtual platforms could mitigate frequently cited barriers to local procurement like finding vendors and coordinating delivery and logistics.

With families at home and children learning online, novel education approaches brought farm to ECE to the family computer, engaging parents, caregivers, and entire households in food-based learning and activities. Acknowledging that this online approach must account for age-appropriate screen time recommendations, virtual learning opportunities can be offered in a way that increases caregiver capacity for engaging with children off-screen. While family engagement is a crucial yet challenging part of farm to ECE in normal times, the models developed during the pandemic that have effectively reached families can be built upon for future implementation.

Georgia: Sustaining Child Care Businesses through Stabilization Grants

The COVID-19 health crisis has had a profound impact on child care providers, many of whom operate as small businesses and were forced to close their doors or experienced dramatic declines in enrollment. To help ECE providers sustain their businesses during the pandemic, Georgia's Quality Care for Children (QCC) partnered with Promise All Atlanta Children Thrive to support family child care providers through a series of stabilization grants. While the initial grants were limited to ECE providers in the city of Atlanta, QCC was able to respond to the needs of the larger community and expanded eligibility for the grants to a broader region. Family child care homes can use stabilization grants toward a range of costs, including the mortgage, labor, utilities, or garden maintenance. Over \$1 million was distributed in grants to ECE centers and family child care homes.

While states and communities continue to build capacity to implement additional virtual training and expand online purchasing options, it will be critical to ensure equitable access to these virtual opportunities by also addressing the digital divide. For example, inequities in access to high-speed internet or appropriate technology ultimately limit the universal reach of virtual platforms and may exacerbate inequitable access for rural or less-resourced programs. Even with these barriers, forced acceleration of these virtual education and online market platforms may have actually increased long-term capacity for farm to ECE in some communities and increased equitable access to farm to ECE initiatives.

Continue cultivating connections across local food systems and emergency food assistance programs

While the heightened demand for emergency food assistance is devastating, the increased attention and funding focused on emergency food programs has strengthened the link between these programs and the local food and ECE sectors. Federal, state, and local investments supported food banks and other emergency food sources in purchasing more unprocessed product from local and regionally serving producers. This approach addressed the sudden lack of markets producers faced when COVID-19 shut down institutions while increasing access to fresh, nutritious foods for families in need. At the same time, schools and ECE sites became important emergency food distribution points for families. In some cases, farm to ECE stakeholders were important actors in bridging local food systems and families seeking support. These cross-sector relationships are vital for local producers and for the children and families they serve. Emergency food assistance programs are not long-term solutions for communities. However, in this emergency scenario, states and communities should continue to leverage program dollars for local and regional producers, supporting community-driven projects and solutions. This ensures families can access support with dignity and promotes long-term food sovereignty.

Expand pilot programs that connect families directly to farm to ECE

COVID-19 adaptations, like programs that increased families' access to local foods through emergency food distribution, brought local food and local food education directly into homes like never before. Farm to ECE practitioners shifted their efforts from simply getting food into ECE sites to using ECE sites as conduits to get local food directly to families through weekly food boxes and innovative CSA pilots. For example, state partners were able to leverage connections between ECE and K-12 school systems and farmers markets to extend their family engagement efforts while promoting access to local foods in new ways. These strategies should continue to be explored as part of the farm to ECE approach to engage the larger community around buying local foods.

Leverage flexibilities of federal nutrition programs

Finally, the flexibilities and waivers given to Child Nutrition Programs offered a glimpse at how these programs might better serve all children and should be sustained as recovery continues across states and localities. In communities utilizing the Summer Food Service Program and Seamless Summer Option that included Area Eligibility Waivers, all children had access to healthy meals, reducing stigma for children and families and reducing administrative burden for already overwhelmed nutrition service programs. While waivers for CACFP offered important flexibilities, significant barriers remain for programs to be able to reach young children and their families if programs remain closed. Offering flexibilities across programs and creating multiple pathways for families of young children to access meals will continue to be an important approach to support child health and nutrition security in communities. State agencies and technical assistance providers are vital sources of information for ECE providers, providing guidance and resources to support them in leveraging Child Nutrition Program waivers to meet the needs of families in their community. Elevating opportunities for providers, encouraging participation from families, and capturing and sharing impacts of the Child Nutrition Program can help propel future policy flexibilities.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 emergency has revealed the inequities, racial injustices, and systemic problems within the ECE and food systems. The crisis has also given rise to innovative solutions, from community-based partnerships to federal policy flexibilities, that may help drive equitable and sustainable rebuilding of future systems. Farm to ECE is both reliant upon and a contributor to the resilience of these systems. By examining and learning from what is working for communities in times of greatest need, we can identify strategies and solutions that should be further incorporated into the fabric of these systems. These lessons can pave the way to advancing farm to ECE as a component of healthy, equitable, and resilient communities into 2021 and beyond.

APPENDIX A:

Federal COVID-19 Aid Legislation and Programs to Support Agriculture, Nutrition, and Early Care and Education Sectors

Agriculture	Family Food Assistance and Child Nutrition Programs	Early Care and Education Programs	Other Relevant Programs (impacting Agriculture and Early Care Sectors)
Coronavirus Preparedness and Response Supplemental Appropriations Act \$8.3 billion Passed: March 6, 2020 Provided funding for federal agencies to respond to the coronavirus outbreak, with the majority of funding going to the Department of Health and Human Services and Centers for Disease Control.			
			COVID-19 Economic Injury Disaster Loans (EIDL) Designed to provide economic relief to businesses experiencing a temporary loss of revenue due to COVID-19. Covers operating costs, including paid sick leave, payroll, and rent or mortgage payments.
Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) \$3 trillion Passed: March 18, 2020 Provides key nutrition funding for Americans suffering from food insecurity. Requires certain employers to provide employees with paid sick leave or expanded family and medical leave for specified reasons related to COVID-19.			
	Pandemic EBT (P-EBT) Provision that allows the Department of Agriculture to approve state plans to provide emergency SNAP assistance to households with children who would otherwise receive free or reduced-price meals if not for their schools being closed due to the COVID-19 emergency. SNAP Emergency Allotments (SNAP EA) Allowed states to temporarily increase SNAP benefits of eligible families to the maximum benefit level.		Emergency Paid Leave Requires certain employers to provide employees with paid sick leave or expanded family and medical leave for specified reasons related to COVID-19.

Child Nutrition Program Waivers

Gives USDA the authority to consider new flexibilities and waivers to ensure continued access to school meals during school closures. Waivers and flexibilities include:

- Meal Time
- Non-Congregate Feeding
- Meal Pattern
- Parent/Guardian Pick-Up

The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP)

Provides additional funds to assist local food banks to meet increased demand from low-income Americans during the emergency. Funding is for the purchase of nutritious foods and to support the storage and distribution of the foods.

Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act)

\$2 Trillion

Passed: March 27, 2020

Aims to provide fast and direct economic assistance for American workers and families, small businesses, and preserve jobs for American industries.

Farmers to Families Food Box*

Funds the USDA Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) to partner with national, regional, and local distributors to purchase up to \$3 billion in fresh produce, dairy, and meat products from American producers that will be distributed in family-sized boxes through food banks, community and faith-based organizations, and other non-profits.

Coronavirus Food Assistance Program*

Provides \$16 billion in direct relief payments to producers who faced price declines and additional marketing costs resulting from lost demand and short-term oversupply.

Online SNAP

USDA expanded an innovative SNAP online grocery purchase pilot program in select states.

Food Distribution

\$9.5 million to USDA Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) to continue operations of food distribution programs including [The Emergency Food Assistance Program \(TEFAP\)](#), which makes [USDA Foods](#) available to state distribution agencies like food banks; the [Commodity Supplemental Food Program \(CSFP\)](#), which serves low-income people ages 60 and over; and the [Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations \(FDPIR\)](#).

Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG)

Funds can be used to ensure providers that serve children who receive child care subsidies can continue to operate or reopen and provide child care assistance to essential workers during the COVID-19 response regardless of income; and to support eligible child care providers, even those not receiving CCDBG assistance prior to the pandemic, with cleaning, sanitation, and other activities necessary to maintain or resume program operation.

Head Start and Early Head Start

Allocated \$750 million to operate supplemental summer programs for a portion of Head Start children who would otherwise not be served over the summer. Allows centers to continue to pay wages and provide benefits for staff who would otherwise be employed but are unable to report to their full work duties during center closures.

Economic Injury Disaster Loan (EIDL)

Added additional funds for the EIDL program. Increased eligibility to include farmers, ranchers, and other agricultural businesses.

Paycheck Protection Program

An SBA loan that helps businesses keep their workforce employed during the COVID-19 crisis. Agricultural producers, farmers, and ranchers with 500 or fewer employees whose principal place of residence is in the United States are eligible.

Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act, 2021 (CRRSA Act)

\$900 billion

Passed: December 27, 2020

Aims to extend relief funding to families, schools, and businesses while assisting state and local governments in their coronavirus response and recovery efforts.

Coronavirus Food Assistance Program

Expanded eligibility and payment calculations, allowing for payments of up to 80% of revenue loss. Provides \$1.5 billion to fund the fifth round of the [Farmers to Families Food Box Program](#).

Dairy Product Donation Program

Provides \$400 million to facilitate the donation of dairy products to non-profit entities (food banks, food providers) and minimize food waste.

Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program (GusNIP)

Provides \$75 million to incentivize the purchasing of local and healthy fruits and vegetables by SNAP recipients.

Pandemic EBT (P-EBT)

Expands access by deeming all children under age six “enrolled” in child care, so all children living in households receiving SNAP qualify for P-EBT.

SNAP Emergency Allotments (SNAP EA)

Increases monthly SNAP benefit by 15% through June 2021. Provides up to \$100 million for state administrative costs. Provides an additional \$5 million for technical support for online purchasing program.

Child and Adult Care Food Program

Provides as much funding as is necessary to continue emergency funding payments and reimbursement for March –June 2020, of up to 55% of 2019 reference months (e.g., 55% of the difference in payments between May 2019–May 2020).

The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP)

Provides \$400 million for food banks, of which up to 20% can be used for the cost associated with the distribution of commodities.

Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG)

Provides \$10 billion in supplemental appropriations of 2021 allocations for states and territories to provide relief to families paying a portion of child care costs and to support the stability of the child care sector.

Head Start and Early Head Start

Allocated \$250 million to prevent, prepare for, and respond to COVID-19.

Paycheck Protection Program (PPP)

Extension of program and increase in eligible expenditures. Establishes calculations for the maximum loan amounts for farmers and ranchers. Increases eligibility to Farm Credit System Institutions.

American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (ARP Act)

\$1.9 trillion

Passed: March 11, 2021

Aims to provide additional relief to address the continued impact of COVID-19 on the economy, public health, state and local governments, individuals, and businesses.

Food Supply Chain and Agriculture Pandemic Response

Provides \$4 billion to purchase and distribute food and agriculture commodities (including fresh produce, dairy, seafood, eggs, and meat), as well as grants and loans for small and mid-sized food processors, distributors, and to maintain supply chain resiliency.

Farm Loan Assistance for Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers

Provides \$4 billion in debt relief for socially disadvantaged farmers to pay off debt, as well as \$1.01 billion to create a racial equity commission at the USDA. Efforts to address longstanding discrimination include investing in land access, outreach, education, and barriers to USDA programs.

Pandemic EBT (P-EBT)

Provides more than \$5 billion to expand access for the duration of the health emergency, including through the summer months.

SNAP Emergency Allotments (SNAP EA)

Extension of monthly SNAP benefit by 15% (about \$28 more per person) through September 2021. Provides up to \$1.15 billion for the cost of state administrative expenses. Additional allocation to continue technological improvements in purchasing online groceries with SNAP benefits.

Child and Adult Care Food Program

Temporarily expands the age eligibility in emergency homeless shelters participating in CACFP, from 18 to 25, for the duration of the pandemic.

Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)

Provides \$880 million to expand access to more fruits and vegetables, increasing benefits from \$9 for children and \$11 for women to \$35 per month, through September 2021. Funding will also help with modernization, innovation, and outreach for the WIC program.

The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP)

Provides an additional \$1.25 billion to purchase foods through the Agricultural Research Service, \$293 million to support critical operational needs such as storage, transportation, and staffing, as well as boosting “bonus” buys for distribution, all to help support state food banks.

Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG)

Provides \$39 billion in supplemental appropriations of 2021 allocations for states and territories to provide relief to families paying a portion of child care costs and to support the stability of the child care sector.

Head Start and Early Head Start

Allocated \$1 billion to prevent, prepare for, and respond to COVID-19. After setting aside funds for federal administrative expenses, remaining amounts will be sent out as one-time grants to each Head Start agency based on the number of enrolled children.

Paycheck Protection Program (PPP)

Additional allocation of \$7.25 billion, and eligibility expansion to certain non-profits. These funds followed President Biden’s February 22 announced changes to the Small Business Administration’s COVID-19 relief programs to ensure equity, specifically for small businesses and nonprofits with fewer than 20 employees.

Child Tax Credit

Increased amount from \$2,000 to \$3,600 per child under age 6, and \$3,000 per child under age 18. This expands eligibility to children 17 years old and younger, rather than 16.

*Farmers to Families Food Box Program and Coronavirus Food Assistance Program were created under authorities issued under FFCRA and funding issued under FFCRA, the CARES Act, and other federal funding sources.