



COOK COUNTY FOOD ACCESS TASK FORCE

Final Recommendations: Improving Food Access for Individuals with Justice-System Involvement and Their Families

May 13, 2020

Introduction

For people with justice-system involvement, meeting basic needs can be a challenge. According to the Bread for the World Institute, incarceration is a significant cause of hunger.¹ Indeed, 9 in 10 people with a criminal record in a 2013 National Institutes of Health study were food insecure.² Frequently, people navigating the justice-system face the loss of housing and employment as they struggle to make court dates, afford the costs and fees associated with electronic monitoring and the courts, and face stigma.³ Likewise, a criminal record can make it difficult to find work and can drive returning citizens into poverty.⁴ These consequences extend beyond the individual with system-involvement, leaving deep and long-lasting effects on their families as well. Nearly half of families with an incarcerated loved one have trouble meeting their basic food needs.⁵

An estimated **42%** of Illinois adults have some type of criminal record.

Over the last two years, the Cook County Food Access Task Force has explored immediate, concrete ways that Cook County government and Cook County’s food bank, the Greater Chicago Food Depository, could address the unique food access challenges for individuals and families impacted by the justice system. This brief outlines the work of the Task Force and makes a number of recommendations for immediate ways to address food insecurity.

Cook County Food Access Task Force and its Work

In 2016, Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinckle and the Greater Chicago Food Depository announced the creation of a Cook County Food Access Plan and a Task Force to implement that plan, aimed at building upon existing resources to increase access to nutritious food and create new solutions to food insecurity.

PARTICIPATING AGENCIES

- Office of the President
- Cook County Health and Hospital System
- Justice Advisory Council
- Office of the Cook County State’s Attorney
- Law Office of the Cook County Public Defender
- Cook County Sheriff
- Office of the Chief Judge
- Greater Chicago Food Depository

¹ Gamblin, Marlysa D., “Mass Incarcerations: A Major Cause of Hunger” Bread for the World Institute, February 2018, *available at* <https://www.bread.org/library/mass-incarceration-major-cause-hunger>.
² A Pilot Study Examining Food Insecurity and HIV Risk Behaviors Among Individuals Recently Released from Prison. National Institute of Health. April 2013, *available at* <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3733343/>
³ See e.g. Kofman, Ava, “Digital Jail: How Electronic Monitoring Drives Defendants into Debt” ProPublica, July 3, 2019, *available at* <https://www.propublica.org/article/digital-jail-how-electronic-monitoring-drives-defendants-into-debt>
⁴ See *supra* n. 1.
⁵ “Who Pays? The True Cost of Incarceration on Families” Ella Baker Center for Human Rights. September 2015, *available at* <http://ellabakercenter.org/sites/default/files/downloads/who-pays.pdf> .



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As the initial stages of implementation of that plan came to a close, the Task Force identified a specific need to address food access for those affected by the justice system. To that end, the Task Force identified the following objectives for its next phase of work:

- **Stabilize lives of individuals involved in the criminal justice system and their families.** At all levels of the criminal justice system, individuals and families face daily hurdles that have serious ripple effects on other aspects of their lives. Providing resources can help stabilize individuals and families transition back into their community.
- **Provide appropriate interventions that meet the needs of specific populations.** Many people being discharged from jail or who have been sentenced to probation have specific needs and/or barriers should be considered when identifying an appropriate intervention.

Beginning in March 2018, the Task Force undertook the task of recommending ways to increase access to food and reduce food insecurity for people with criminal records or those currently navigating the justice-system.

How the Recommendations Were Developed

The Task Force convened leaders throughout the Cook County system to examine where there may be opportunities to make discrete changes to the system to improve food access for those with justice-system involvement. The Task Force convened several times each year, with information-gathering between meetings, to evaluate that information and craft and refine recommendations.

Among the group's key reflections were:

- There are key moments when County officials are interacting with individuals and families may be able to provide referrals and information to those experiencing food insecurity.
- Information and materials about food insecurity and available resources are critical to helping County offices play a role in addressing food insecurity.

WHAT IS FOOD INSECURITY?

Lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy lifestyle

As the recommendations were developed, the Task Force also incorporated feedback from impacted individuals and community stakeholders into its analysis and refined its recommendations to ensure that recommendations were addressing concrete needs of people engaging with county systems.

FOCUS GROUP FEEDBACK

Through the generous support of University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), Center for Health Equity Research Chicago (CHER Chicago), the Food Depository, in partnership with a number of community organizations, convened discussion groups to better understand the intersection of food insecurity and structural violence through the lens of those with justice system involvement. These roundtable discussions were designed to facilitate an authentic, open, and honest discussion between those with lived experience of criminal justice involvement and food insecurity.

Some key reflections from the focus groups include:

- Many justice-involved individuals are not aware of what resources are available to address food insecurity, misunderstand eligibility criteria or other rules, or experience stigma around seeking help from a food pantry or other resource.



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- Families facing barriers to stability because of sustained system involvement are often making tough choices and trade-offs to meet their most immediate needs. Finding resources is time-intensive and individuals often have to prioritize among needs.
- Community violence and trauma affect food-related decisions, including affecting whether and when someone travels to purchase nutritious food and individual food decisions.
- Many participants described facing food insecurity throughout their lives and how the inability to meet a person or family's basic needs is among the pressures that can lead to criminal activity and criminal justice system involvement.

These insights helped inform the Task Force's discussions and recommendations.

STAKEHOLDER INPUT

As the Task Force moved into the final stages of its work, it sought feedback and additional information from key community stakeholders, including impacted individuals, organizations working with people with criminal records, and organizations working with or advocating on behalf of people with justice-system involvement.

Stakeholders highlighted the following to inform the Task Force's work:

- **Justice-system involvement can strip individuals and families of both financial and time resources.** The time and resources needed to navigate state and local systems and resources in order to meet an individual's or a family's basic needs can be daunting. Stakeholders indicated that transportation to and from food resources, including the grocery or to the DHS office to apply for SNAP may be barrier to food access.
- **Rumors about the ramifications of a criminal record or system-involvement run rampant.** Stakeholders reported concerns about misinformation about the legal and practical barriers for households impacted by the justice system, which may result in individuals and families not seeking available help. In Illinois, for example, unless an individual has committed SNAP fraud, a criminal record does not affect someone's SNAP eligibility.
- **Meeting basic needs can be difficult on electronic monitoring.** The restrictions placed on individuals during electronic monitoring may make it difficult for them to go to the grocery store, food pantry, or seek medical attention in a timely way.
- **For individuals with system-involvement, providing identification or proof of address required by some providers can make meeting basic needs difficult.** Justice-system involvement often disrupts stable housing and forces many people to change their address. But getting a new ID takes time, transportation, and money at a time when people are facing many other costs. The result is that it is more difficult for individuals to use available resources in their community, like food pantries and other support systems, if those programs require proof of address or identification.

SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (SNAP)

Commonly known as "food stamps," the SNAP program helps low-income individuals and families meet their basic nutritional needs.



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Recommendations

SYSTEM-WIDE RECOMMENDATIONS

The Task Force identified some key steps forward that all agencies throughout the County system can take to help address food insecurity for people with justice-system involvement and their families.

Infuse Materials/Information about Resources to Address Food Insecurity Throughout the County System

Throughout the County system, providing referrals and marketing materials that connect food insecure community members with nutrition assistance is an easy and effective way to help ensure that individuals in need have critical information. These materials can also play an important role in helping dispel rumors that can prohibit people with a criminal record or navigating the justice system from seeking food assistance.

The Task Force recommends the creation and dissemination of the following materials:

- *Posters for Waiting Rooms* including information about where to find assistance and basic information about programs/eligibility
- *Full- and Half-Page Flyers* including the same basic information as a poster, but in a take-away format
- *Quick Referral Business Cards* are designed to be provided in an individual conversation and include only limited information, such as a telephone number or email
- *One-Pager Specific to Resources for People with System-Involvement* that help dispel rumors and identify resources that can help individuals and families meet their nutritional needs.

The Task Force recommends that the above material be provided on-line and, at a minimum, in the following locations:

- Courthouses
- Electronic Monitoring Program (Sheriff)
- Sheriff's Police
- Adult Probation
- Public Defender's Offices
- Corrections
- Juvenile Probation
- State's Attorney's Offices
- CCH Locations
- Pre-Trial Services
- Civil Process
- Justice Advisory Council

The President's Office, the Sheriff's Office, the State's Attorney's Office, Cook County Health, and the Office of the Chief Judge will also identify partners with whom they can share the materials and encourage disbursement. The Task Force recommends sharing electronic versions of materials whenever possible as more and more interactions occur electronically.

COVID-19 Underscores Why Addressing Food Insecurity for People with Justice System Involvement is Vital

The bulk of the Task Force's work occurred before the COVID-19 crisis upended the lives of individuals and families throughout Cook County. But the COVID-19 crisis has laid bare both the devastating effects of structural racism, the vulnerability of those living in poverty, and how uniquely exposed people with justice-system involvement are during a time of crisis.

Ensuring that individuals and their families can access nutritional food during times of crisis is essential. As our community grapples with the risks and vulnerabilities exposed by COVID-19, these recommendations are needed now more than ever.



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Equipping County Staff: The Task Force also recommends developing talking points and supporting materials be provided to staff throughout the Cook County system to help better equip staff to identify when providing information or a referral may be appropriate and feel confident talking about food insecurity and available resources.

Expand Opportunities for County Staff to Learn, Volunteer, and Engage

Many Cook County staff are interested in giving back. And opportunities for people to volunteer, learn, or engage on issues related to hunger are often the best way to cultivate a community that combats hunger. As a result, the Task Force recommends County Offices and the Food Depository establish formal partnerships to allow County staff to visit the depository, volunteer at a food pantry, and learn about food insecurity.

Feedback from focus groups and stakeholders highlighted the day-to-day challenges and barriers to success that people experiencing poverty and hunger routinely face. Often, interactions with government officials and service providers fail to recognize the ripple effects of those challenges. The Task Force therefore recommends that County Offices explore engaging key staff who work with people experience poverty in a poverty simulation or similar training to deepen understanding of the experience of living in poverty.

SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for the Office of the Chief Judge

The Office of the Chief Judge is the administrative arm of the Circuit Court of Cook County. The Office supervises non-judicial employees who provide a number of court-support services, including Adult Probation and Juvenile Probation.

Adult Probation and Pre-Trial Services

Probation is the alternative to jail and prison. The Adult Probation Department (APD) supervises people who have been sentenced, assesses pretrial risk, and supervises pretrial defendants. Probation officers have regular contact with individuals in the criminal justice system and can be a resource to help ensure individuals and their families are supported.

The Task Force recommends Adult Probation and Pre-Trial Services:

- 1) Provide probation officers and other relevant staff with information about food insecurity, public benefits, and other resources that help individuals meet their basic needs;
- 2) Ensure that staff have reviewed talking point materials regarding food insecurity and are distributing relevant materials routinely and appropriately; and
- 3) Implement food insecurity screening questions into the case-management system and provide direct referrals and informational materials to individuals;
- 4) Incorporate robust information about food insecurity and food resources in the updates to the probation officers' resource guide.

Juvenile Probation

The Juvenile Probation Department is committed to creating safer neighborhoods through relationships, opportunities, and experiences that promote hope, responsibility, and lawful behavior in children and minors. Juvenile probation officers work with children and their families to help ensure that they have the support they need while they are engaged with the department.



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The Task Force recommends that Juvenile Probation:

- 1) Educate juvenile probation officers and staff about food insecurity as a part of their on-going training and provide easy reference materials and talking points to any staff encountering juveniles and families who may experience food insecurity;
- 2) Incorporate food insecurity screening questions into the forthcoming case management system and provide direct referrals and informational materials to families; and
- 3) Incorporate food access, including transportation and referrals for food resources, into case planning.

Recommendations for Cook County Health

Cook County Health (CCH) aims to deliver integrated health services with dignity and respect regardless of a patient's ability to pay; foster partnerships with other health providers and communities to enhance the health of the public; and advocate for policies that promote the physical, mental, and social well-being of the people of Cook County. CCH staff routinely interact with people experiencing poverty and food insecurity.⁶

The Task Force recommends CCH:

- 1) Provide staff with information about food insecurity, public benefits, and other resources that could help their patients and families meet their basic needs;
- 2) Ensure that staff unfamiliar with public benefits have reviewed talking point materials and are distributing informational materials as appropriate;
- 3) Implement SNAP application referrals or direct assistance for individuals who are also applying for Medicaid or undergoing Medicaid redetermination with assistance from CCH;
- 4) Ensure that CountyCare Medicaid Health Plan members are informed about potential eligibility in SNAP; and
- 5) Disseminate materials to encourage sister agencies to provide referrals to CCH for public benefits assistance with Medicaid and WIC.

Recommendations for Offices Under the President

The President of the Cook County Board of Commissioners is the Chief Executive Officer of Cook County. The President oversees the Offices Under the President including the Office of the Public Defender and the Justice Advisory Council.

Office of the Public Defender

The Office of the Public Defender provides legal representation for individuals facing criminal charges in Cook County who cannot afford an attorney.

The Task Force recommends that the Public Defender:

- 1) Provide staff with information about food insecurity, public benefits, and other resources that could help their clients and families meet their basic needs; and
- 2) Ensure that staff have reviewed talking point materials and are disseminating materials as appropriate.

⁶ CCH has had a partnership with the Food Depository since 2015. That partnership includes screening patients for food insecurity, providing fresh produce, and piloting a prepared meal program for discharged patients with chronic illnesses in the hopes of preventing rehospitalization.



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Justice Advisory Council

The mission of the Cook County Justice Advisory Council is to work collaboratively with justice system stakeholders to safely reduce the adult and juvenile jail populations, while ensuring systemic as well as community support to reduce recidivism and increase public safety.

The Task Force recommends that the Justice Advisory Council:

- 1) Educate staff of the Justice Advisory Council about food insecurity, public benefits, and other resources; and
- 2) Promote materials, any information about food insecurity or public benefits trainings shared with the Council, and referrals for assistance with food access among grantee partner organizations and community partners via email or other appropriate communication.

Recommendations for the Sheriff's Office

The Sheriff's Office provides security to county and court facilities, manages the Cook County Jail, and provides policing throughout the county.

The Task Force recommends following across departments in the Sheriff's Office:

- 1) Provide all Sheriff's staff with information about food insecurity, public benefits, and other resources that help individuals meet their basic needs; and
- 2) Ensure that staff have reviewed talking point materials and are disseminating these materials as appropriate.

Cook County Department of Corrections

The Cook County Department of Corrections (CCDOC) is one of the largest single-site jails in the country. Approximately 100,000 individuals circulate through the jail annually. The daily jail population averages 6,100.

The Task Force recommends that the Department of Corrections:

- 1) Provide a one-page resource guide to provide critical information about accessing food resources to individuals and their families when someone is discharged from the jail.

Community Corrections

Community Corrections includes Electronic Monitoring (EM), Sheriff's Work Alternative Program, and Restoring Neighborhoods Workforce and provides public safety and alternatives to incarceration and community supervision for participants in these programs. Individuals on EM may request and be granted one-time movement, without the need to provide prior documentation, in order to go to a grocery store, food pantry, or public benefits office.

The Task Force recommends that Community Corrections:

- 1) Provide written information to EM participants at the beginning of the program that explains how to request one-time movement if needed to get food and provides referrals to food and nutrition resources; and
- 2) Explore whether questions about food access can be incorporated at intake or through any of the supportive services provided by Community Corrections.



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Eviction Social Services

The Evictions Social Services Unit provides assistance to individuals who are elderly, mentally ill, physically disabled and families with very young children who are facing evictions. Frequently, people with justice-system involvement face challenges maintaining their housing. The Social Services Unit helps eviction defendants connect with social services organizations that can be helpful prior to the enforcement of the eviction.

The Task Force recommends that the Evictions Social Services ensure that addressing food insecurity is fully incorporated into the work of social workers assisting households facing eviction, including:

- 1) Working with families to ensure that they are able to go to the grocery, food pantry, or public benefits office; and
- 2) Enhancing the connection between sheriff's staff and the food and nutrition community, including the Food Depository's public benefits team, to help facilitate food access during a household's time of crisis.

Recommendations for the State's Attorney's Office

The Cook County State's Attorney's Office (CCSAO) is responsible for the prosecution of all misdemeanor and felony crimes committed in Cook County.

The Task Force recommends the State's Attorney:

- 1) Provide the State's Attorney staff with information about food insecurity, public benefits, and other resources that could help victims, witnesses, and their families meet their basic needs;
- 2) Ensure that staff have reviewed talking point materials and are disseminating materials as appropriate; and
- 3) Enhance how addressing food insecurity is incorporated into the work of the Victim Witness Assistance Unit including providing information about food access to program participants.

The Food Depository's Commitment to Implementation and the Work Ahead

In order to move the above recommendations forward, the Food Depository will work with members of the Task Force and county agencies to help support the creation of core materials and generally be a resource for County officials as these recommendations are implemented.

The Food Depository will also continue its work to ensure access to food resources, including reevaluating how addresses are verified within Cook County's food pantry system and advancing policy opportunities to connect individuals with SNAP benefits before existing the prison system.

LOOKING FORWARD

The foregoing are concrete steps that the County can take today to improve food access for people with justice-system involvement. They are only a first step, however, and there is broader work to be done. The Task Force learned about a number of critical areas for longer-term reform that may make a sizable difference in hunger among those with justice-system involvement.

These reforms include:

- Permanently eliminating the work-requirement for Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents altogether under federal law so that individuals struggling find a job with adequate work hours—a common challenge for people with a criminal record—never have to face the added challenge of food insecurity.



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- Ensuring that individuals with a criminal record receive SNAP Employment and Training services so they are better positioned to find employment.
- Assisting individuals within the Illinois Department of Corrections with SNAP applications prior to discharge, so that SNAP benefits are immediately available to individuals upon release from prison.

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