

BEST PRACTICE REPORT

MULTIAGENCY RESPONSE TO FOOD INSECURITY DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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AGE FRIENDLY
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PROMOTING FOOD SECURITY DURING COVID-19

On March 11th, 2020, the COVID-19 was declared as a pandemic and this created challenges for food security in Tompkins County. A number of community organizations stepped up to the challenge and built overnight a new system for food delivery for older adults and children. How did they do this? That is the story of this project.

When COVID-19 hit, these organizations came together. They coordinated in a new, exciting and dynamic way to address food insecurity issues of both children and older adults in Tompkins County. The Tompkins County Age Friendly Center for Excellence decided to profile this initiative as a best practice.

To do this, we interviewed people from seven agencies who were key players in the initiative. Over the course of the summer 2020, we explored how they came together, what they did that was different, and what were some of the challenges and the lessons learned. These are the focus of this report.

The key challenges were:

- To build up a pool of suitable volunteers for better coordination and sustainability.
- To pay extra attention to social connection and mental health among older adults.
- To teach older adults how to use simple technology, thus making their lives easier.
- To optimize cross-agency collaboration in networks that consolidate the partnership.
- To explore ways to address the transportation needs of people in rural areas.
- To address food insecurity and health inequity issues on a long-term basis.

The key barriers that the partnership addressed were:

- Communication - to maintain a trusted relationship where people can get connections easily.
- Coordination - to improve a collaborative relationship where diverse agencies can each play their unique role in the whole system.
- Finance - to build up a supportive relationship where organizations can get consistent financial support.
- Innovation - to explore a dynamic relationship where organizations can take innovative approaches in response to the crisis.

While the purpose of this report is to focus on existing organizations, we would also like to acknowledge the many grassroots volunteers and informal food distribution networks that arose from the COVID-19 crisis, including the expansion of food pantry sites and hours, and all of the other ways that people in Tompkins County helped one another during this difficult time.

KEY PARTNERS

In this section, eight agencies are briefly described - their general services, the changed needs during this pandemic, as well as their corresponding measures to handle food insecurity issues. The following descriptions provide a brief overview of what they did during the COVID-19 crisis to enhance food access and distribution. This is the foundation for the entire report of best practices.

Child Development Council

The Child Development Council is a non-profit organization which promotes the healthy development of children and families at home, in childcare and in the community. During the COVID-19 pandemic when some people lost resources and income, the Child Development Council expanded their program to help address the needs of young families. Families in the community could sign up twice a month and receive formula and other baby supplies via a drive-through. They also partnered with Gadabout and local school districts for delivery of baby supplies via their buses.

Foodnet Meals on Wheels

Foodnet Meals on Wheels provides over 170,000 meals to about 800 older adults and others in throughout Tompkins County. Foodnet also provides congregate dining, comprehensive nutrition services and referral coordination. During the pandemic, Foodnet Meals on Wheels applied a rotating delivery schedule to handle staffing shortages and to coordinate delivery routes with safety precautions that limit contact. On each delivery by Foodnet Meals on Wheels, people receive a hot meal, a frozen meal for the following day, and a cold sandwich meal if they chose. Foodnet also transitioned their congregate dining program participants to home meal delivery. At the beginning of the pandemic in March, they delivered 8,750 frozen meals to all of their clients, which provided a 14-day emergency supply of meals for clients to have on hand in the event of pandemic-related service disruption. On a regular basis, they continue to deliver about a thousand more meals every week compared to pre-pandemic months.

Gadabout

Gadabout is a para-transit agency that provides transportation services to anyone over 60 and disabled residents within Tompkins County. When the COVID-19 pandemic began in March, Gadabout expanded its focus to include food delivery services. From April to June 2020, Gadabout delivered 223 food packages and 60 packages of baby supplies to people and families in need.

Love Living at Home

Love Living at Home (LLH) is a grassroots organization that builds village connections within Tompkins County to help members who are 62 or older. LLH sent emails to their members or called members who do not use email to make sure that everyone had food. They helped do grocery shopping every week where

people could either call with their shopping list, or through the Instacart platform, and they also went to the TC3 Food Bank pickup for members who needed it. Instead of holding face-to-face regular events, LLH had some online programming through ZOOM and phone calls to keep members connected.

Tompkins County Office for the Aging

Tompkins County Office for the Aging (COFA) is a social services agency that assists older adults and helps address long-term care needs of all people in the community. During the pandemic, COFA received CARES Act funding for additional shelf stable meals from New York State Office for the Aging, and they partnered with Foodnet Meals on Wheels to deliver these food boxes to the most vulnerable people and those with no families. COFA also worked with Tompkins County Probation to use probation vans to pick up the food. They developed a list of volunteers that would help people do their grocery shopping.

Tompkins County School Districts

During the school year, schools provide breakfast and lunch weekdays to all students - some free, some reduced price, some full price. After the COVID-19 shut down, schools quickly organized to provide meals to kids. Some districts used school buses to deliver food to children at home. Others offered pick up at school buildings. For example, the Ithaca City School District provided approximately 2700 meals to young people for either pickup or delivery each weekday in March. The Groton Central School District used its school buses to deliver breakfast and lunch to every child in the district when the COVID-19 pandemic began and through the rest of the school year.

United Way of Tompkins County

The United Way of Tompkins County (UWTC) raises contributions to support the growth of individuals and the agencies that help residents in Tompkins County. During the pandemic, UWTC partnered with several organizations to help deliver food to individuals. In April, they organized 66 deliveries by phone calls, 11 deliveries that included produce through informal connection with the Friendship Donations Network, 100 deliveries of produce through the Healthy Food for All program at Cornell Cooperative Extension, and 138 deliveries for Cornell Cooperative Extension's Families Participating in Urban 4-H. They also provided funding to support the Child Development Council and many other agencies in Tompkins County.

Way2Go

Way2Go is a program of Cornell Cooperative Extension of Tompkins County to support community transportation services. In response to COVID-19, Way2Go participated in conversations to address food distribution issues, in collaboration with the Tompkins Food Task Force. They partnered with UWTC to connect groups for food collection and distribution with volunteer drivers. Way2Go also connected volunteer drivers with the Healthy Food for All Program and the NatureRx Program to help people do home delivery, and they shared tools for coordinating delivery such as BatchGeo.

NEW APPROACHES

There are many innovations the organizations profiled in this report undertook to meet food security needs in the COVID-19 pandemic. These innovations show flexible new approaches to transportation, technology, communication, volunteers, and collaboration to meet the needs of the community.

Food Delivery Services

Gadabout and school buses had not carried food before COVID-19. When the pandemic was declared, schools were closed, so school districts began providing breakfast and lunch to every child in their districts every day of the week for the next three months. The meals were delivered by school buses or provided on site at the schools, depending upon the needs and resources of the school district. Gadabout provided food delivery services to individuals during COVID-19. For people who didn't know how to get to food pantries, had no way to get there, or no longer had access to enough food, Gadabout and several organizations worked together to help residents get food. In the food access and distribution system, Gadabout was responsible for picking up food boxes at Food Banks and delivering them to individuals.

Rotating Food Delivery Schedule

On each delivery by Foodnet Meals on Wheels, people receive a hot meal, a frozen meal for the following day, and a cold sandwich meal if they chose. Weekend meals are also available for individuals, which are delivered during the weekdays ahead of the upcoming weekend. "We have nine total delivery routes. With the rotating meal delivery schedule, we essentially have two delivery teams, which includes a Monday/Wednesday/Friday delivery schedule and a Tuesday/Thursday schedule. Typically, five routes delivery one day and four routes deliver the next day." They applied a rotating delivery schedule to handle staffing shortages, and to coordinate each delivery route during the pandemic with enhanced safety precautions that focus on limiting contact.

Remote Nutrition Counseling & Case Management

Foodnet Meals on Wheels has a full-time Registered Dietitian, who provides menu planning, counseling, and education to help older adults meet their nutritional needs. Also, on staff is a part-time case manager who supports intake, assessment, and referral coordination services. During the pandemic, nutrition counseling, assessment and case management are provided by telephone. Compared with in-person nutrition counseling in normal times, telephonic and remote service have been found to be efficient in terms of time and expenses associated with traveling to client homes. However, the challenge is that the telephone does not necessarily work for all clients. For instance, some individuals are reluctant to provide personal information over the phone, so the trust building takes a little bit more effort. "The telephone certainly can't replace a home visit and face-to-face contact. However, I suspect that if we

surveyed some of our clients, we would find some who say that they prefer the telephone visit.” Remote nutrition counseling, and referral coordination is a new attempt and approach for nutritional services during this special time.

Trip Fee Waiver

Gadabout suspended fees when COVID-19 hit. Prior to COVID-19, the fares were 2 or 3 dollars for a one-way trip depending on where people were travelling within the community. During the pandemic, they didn't want drivers handling money and that leads to one less contact point with riders. The other reason for discontinuing the fees is that a lot of people were experiencing financial hardship. Gadabout wants to help people who are facing financial hardships. Kristen Wells said, “We still have people that needed to go to the grocery store. We expanded our availability to take people early in the morning as the stores opened for senior citizens and immunocompromised people.” With the support of Gadabout, older adults can have easier access to grocery shopping. After all, caring for older adults and vulnerable populations is one of the most important parts of building an age-friendly community.

Grocery Shopping for People

Love Living at Home sent emails to their members or called members who do not use email to make sure that everyone had food. They helped do shopping by gathering lists and shopping for up to 20 people, or assisted members through Instacart platform every week. They also went to the TC3 Food Bank pickup for members who needed it. Before the pandemic, they took people grocery shopping wherever they typically shop, but now they were doing the actual shopping for people, which is an important change.

A New Volunteer Pool

“The volunteer situation was a little more nuanced during this pandemic,” said Dawn Montanye at Way2Go. “Many older volunteers, as a vulnerable population, stopped volunteering, and meanwhile, many new volunteers stepped forward. We want to be able to keep and harness that volunteer pool going forward.” Way2Go has their own programs within Cooperative Extension called “Healthy Food for All Program” and “NatureRx Program”, and these two programs are intended to provide a CSA share to people who are low income. But due to the COVID-19 pandemic, some people didn't have the ability to go and pick up their food, and thus Way2Go has been directing volunteer drivers to help deliver food. “When we were asking for volunteer drivers to drive people pre-COVID, their responses were few, but many people came forward to volunteer to drive food when the pandemic hit.” Actually, a large number of organizations like Way2Go were committed to improving their approaches in coordinating volunteers with higher efficiency and sustainability. Volunteers, as an integral part of the entire system in food access and distribution, build up a solid component of human resources and power. Therefore, it is really an essential and innovative approach to develop a more comprehensive structure in volunteer management.

DISCUSSION

The previous section described the different roles of agencies and their innovative approaches during this pandemic. This section provides a further analysis of the major themes including volunteers & staff, social connection & technology, and cross-agency collaboration. For each theme, I focus on what the challenges are, how these agencies responded, and how they are moving forward in future practices.

Volunteers & Staff

Challenges

For some organizations, like Gadabout, most of the volunteers or staff are older adults, who are very susceptible to the coronavirus. “Our driver pool tends to be on the older side. A lot of our drivers are in their early 60s all the way to 80, and it’s been difficult when the pandemic hit,” Kristen Wells said. Gadabout had to consider the safety of these older volunteers, whose age bracket is at the highest risk. Their drivers have to own a Commercial Driver’s License, at least Class C, and it’s been difficult to get the license because of the licensing requirements. Love Living at Home was also faced with a lack of volunteers. They had fewer volunteers during COVID-19, as their transportation decreased, and most of their volunteers are 62 and older.

Other organizations, such as the United Way of Tompkins County, received a large number of applications for volunteers during this pandemic, but didn’t need so many people as they had to ensure less social contact during this period. Brandi Remington at UWTC said, “We now have a list of 300 people who have reached out directly to the United Way saying we want to volunteer in the community. A number of folks were teachers who were no longer in the classroom and also some graduate students at Cornell. We have lots of volunteers. It's just difficult getting them opportunities to engage right now.”

Response

“We have a lack of volunteers because our volunteers were in that vulnerable age bracket, and we focus our energy and use the younger staff drivers to fulfill the need. Prior to COVID-19, we were scheduling from 280 to 320 trips per day, we dropped down to 60 trips per day at one point,” Kristen Wells said. Gadabout pulled drivers in the vulnerable age bracket off and had the younger drivers take those trips. For someone who still wanted to serve the community, they put those drivers on the food deliveries because they weren’t exposed to passengers, as this was a contactless delivery.

During COVID-19, with the 'New York State on PAUSE' Executive Order, many of the volunteers needed to pause their work. Volunteers of Foodnet Meals on Wheels, who normally worked in meal packing or at the congregate sites, suspended their work. Foodnet Meals on Wheels was relatively cautious about accepting new volunteers during this period to decrease face-to-face contact. Instead, they asked

community members to write notes and cards to clients. The Tompkins County Emergency Operations Center also helped to coordinate a volunteer from the Tompkins County Probation Office who supported meal deliveries for a period of time.

Opportunities for the future

Building up a pool of suitable volunteers is important. For some organizations, most of their volunteers are older adults, and they had to reduce the delivery schedules due to a shortage of staff, while other agencies received a lot of requests to be a volunteer. By gathering these volunteers together and coordinated them, agencies would be able to help meet each other's needs.

The COVID-19 response also showed the possibility of new business models. For example, Gadabout is considering whether to stay in the food delivery business after the pandemic. "Some days we might have 60 rides, the next day we might have 120 or 140 rides," Kristen Wells said. The fluctuation in the ridership can be partially addressed with meal delivery. COVID-19 might transform how people are travelling. Gadabout plans on continuing food delivery to the greatest possibility that they can. However, the riders will still come first with the service, so riders should be ensured to get where they need to go. "As long as we can coordinate those food deliveries with rider pickups, I foresee us continuing to provide the food service deliveries."

Social Connection & Technology

Challenges

Social isolation and loneliness are serious health issues, especially for older adults during this pandemic. They typically eat alone, stay alone, and feel lonely and less connected. Dawn Montanye at Way2Go said, "If people are disabled or they are aging and isolated, it can create problems that may lead to health problems. In some cases, transportation could also be a barrier." Lisa Monroe at COFA said, "It's hard, as one can't walk into their homes for their protection and for our protection [during the pandemic]. This isn't just about the typical social isolation for older adults, they are socially isolated purposefully." The challenge of social connection is one of the typical problems that needs to be addressed. Luckily, a lot of organizations were committed to supporting the mental health needs of older adults.

Response

"Our services are about so more than a meal. It's more than a meal delivery," said Jessica Gosa. A safety check and a quick friendly visit service by Foodnet Meals on Wheels is equally as important as the meal with about 52% of their clients living alone. During the COVID-19, the contactless meal deliveries ensured the safety of both clients and staff, but it also reduced the social connection. In this case, Foodnet Meals on Wheels was able to develop, with the County Office for the Aging, a program of reassurance calls to all the clients every day. Drivers also connect with their clients by phone when needed to ensure

that they received their meal. The dietitian, case-manager, and interns also provide telephonic support to clients. Many community volunteers from a variety of groups have been sending clients cards, pictures, poems, and notes.

Technology is a useful tool to promote human connection. Members of Love Living at Home were staying connected with phone calls and through ZOOM programming. For example, they actually had a couple of psychotherapists to help if people wanted to talk about more in-depth feelings. Emails also became an emotional connection for people to have an upbeat attitude when they receive information in their inbox. The Lifelong Center has done some work with teaching people how to use computers, and Tompkins County Office for the Aging has put some resources on their web page about how to combat social isolation, giving people some links of things that they could do in their homes.

Opportunities for the future

Social connection among older adults should be given extra attention, as we need to care about their mental health. However, technology can be used for more than promoting social connection. Many organizations are planning to develop their future practices in the application of technology. “Technology is probably our future,” Jessica Gosa said that she has been thinking and incrementally planning during the pandemic in terms of phases. She described phase one as “crisis management,” phase two as “knowledge and education,” and the latest phase as “innovation and sustainability.” Foodnet is exploring new partnerships and working strategically to expand existing partnerships. She suggested that perhaps virtual dining could be an opportunity, and potential creative enhancements to their congregate program are part of their future. “We don't have to go back to the way it was.” Foodnet is trying make innovations in their services to create more opportunities and possibilities in the future. For Love Living at Home, they would like to continue to do the ZOOM programming. “I do think we'll stay connected with doing more phone calls than we ever had,” said Cheryl Jewell. LLH is also trying to be more age-friendly, by getting more people, more connections and more collaborations in the area.

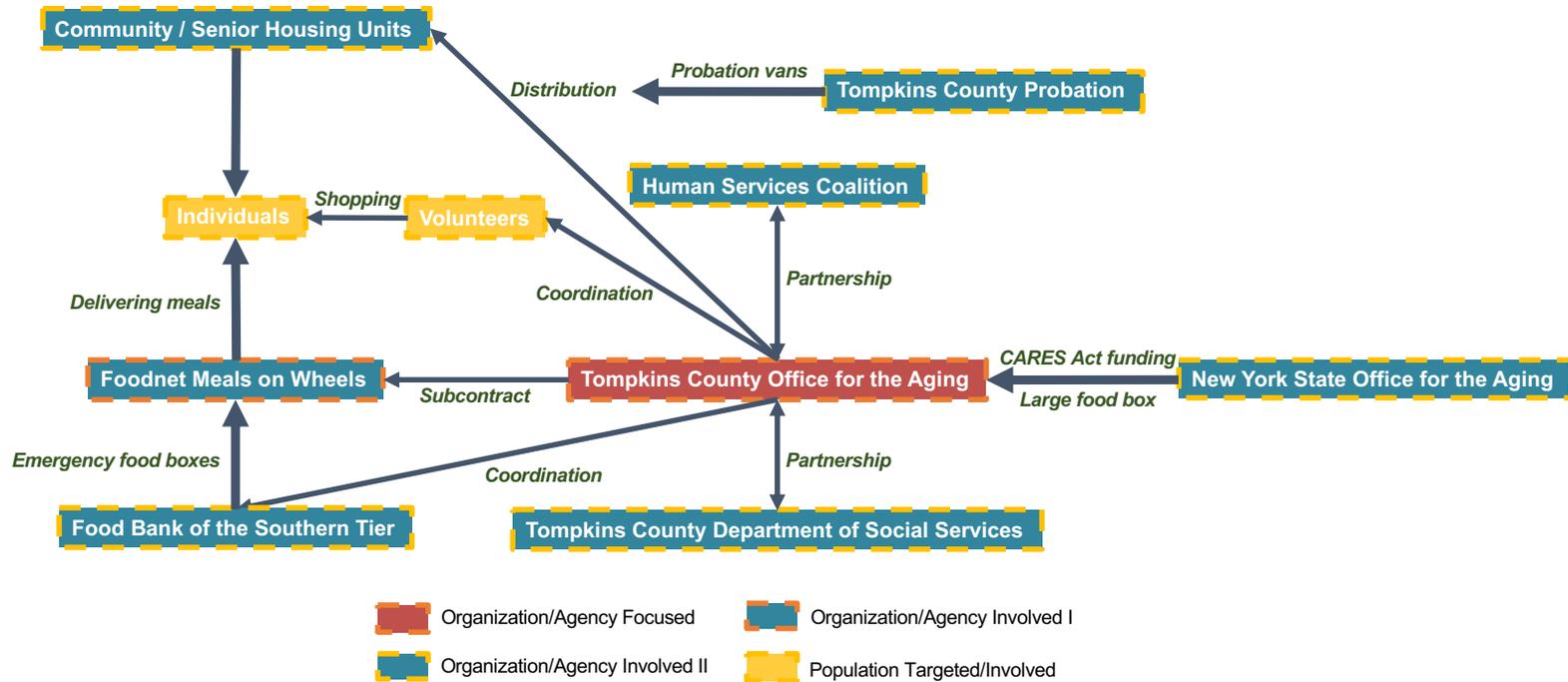
Cross-Agency Collaboration

Challenges

Challenges for cross-agency collaboration normally lie in communication, coordination, finance, and innovation. Key questions are: How can we maintain a trusted relationship where people can get connections easily? How can we improve a collaborative relationship where diverse agencies can each play their unique role in the whole system? How can we build up a supportive relationship where organizations can get consistent financial support? How can we explore a dynamic relationship where organizations can take innovative approaches in response to the crisis?

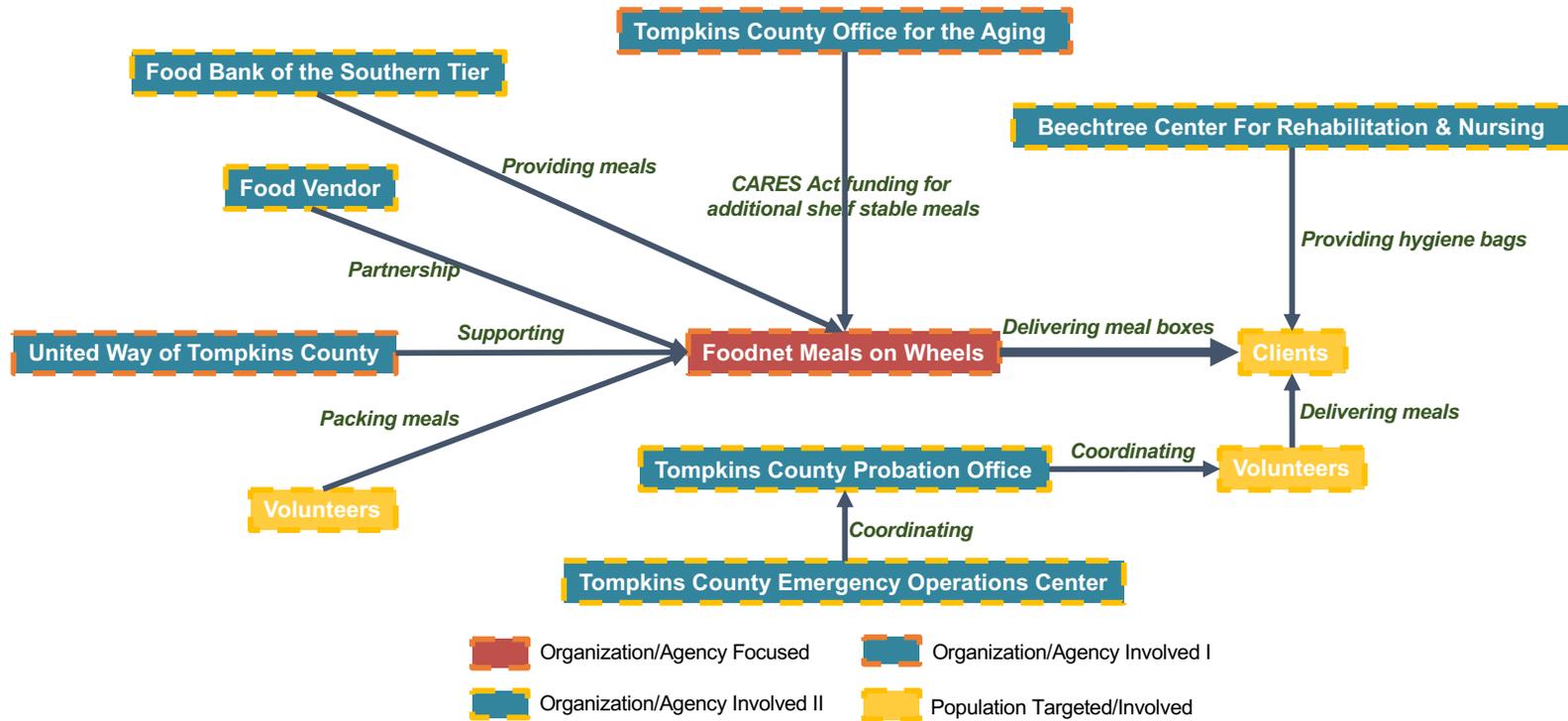
Response

The networks of cross-agency collaboration below are visualized through diagrams, based on the interviews by the seven agencies which were key players in this initiative. Each organization has their own collaboration network, and all of these separate networks combined together have resulted in a complex system for cross-agency collaboration.



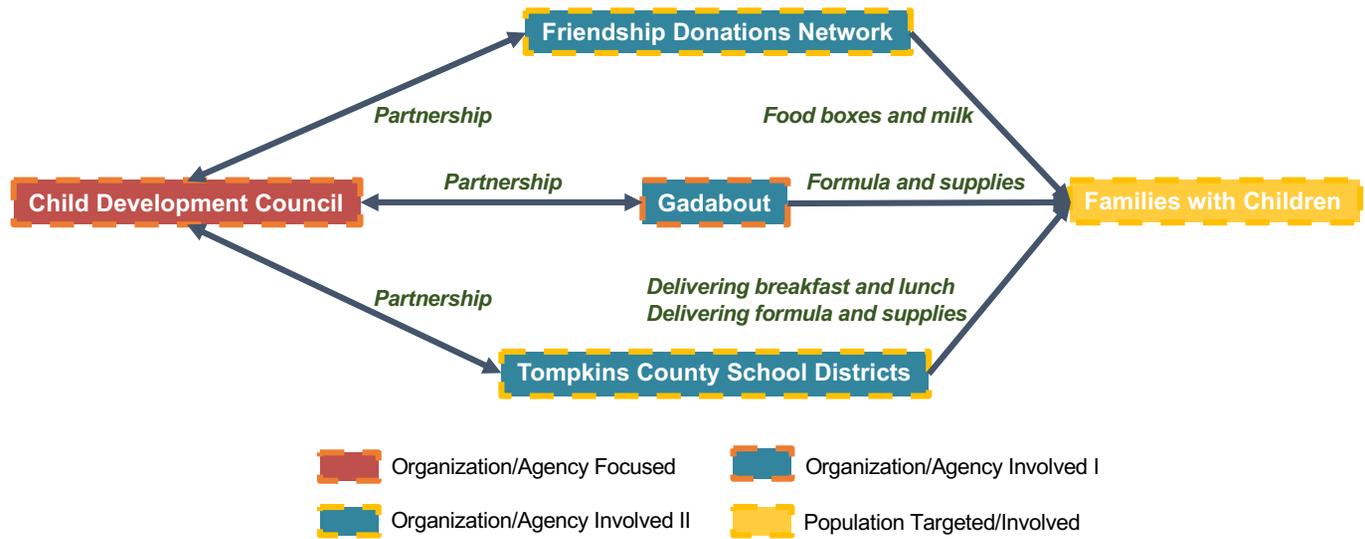
COFA - Focused Collaboration

Tompkins County Office for the Aging (COFA) is one of the key players in this collaboration. COFA allocated funds and subcontracted with Foodnet Meals on Wheels to provide meals to people. They also partnered with the Human Services Coalition, Tompkins County Probation, and Tompkins County Department of Social Services to support the diverse needs of older adults. They coordinated with the Food Bank of Southern Tier for food delivery, and they also had a list of volunteers for grocery shopping.



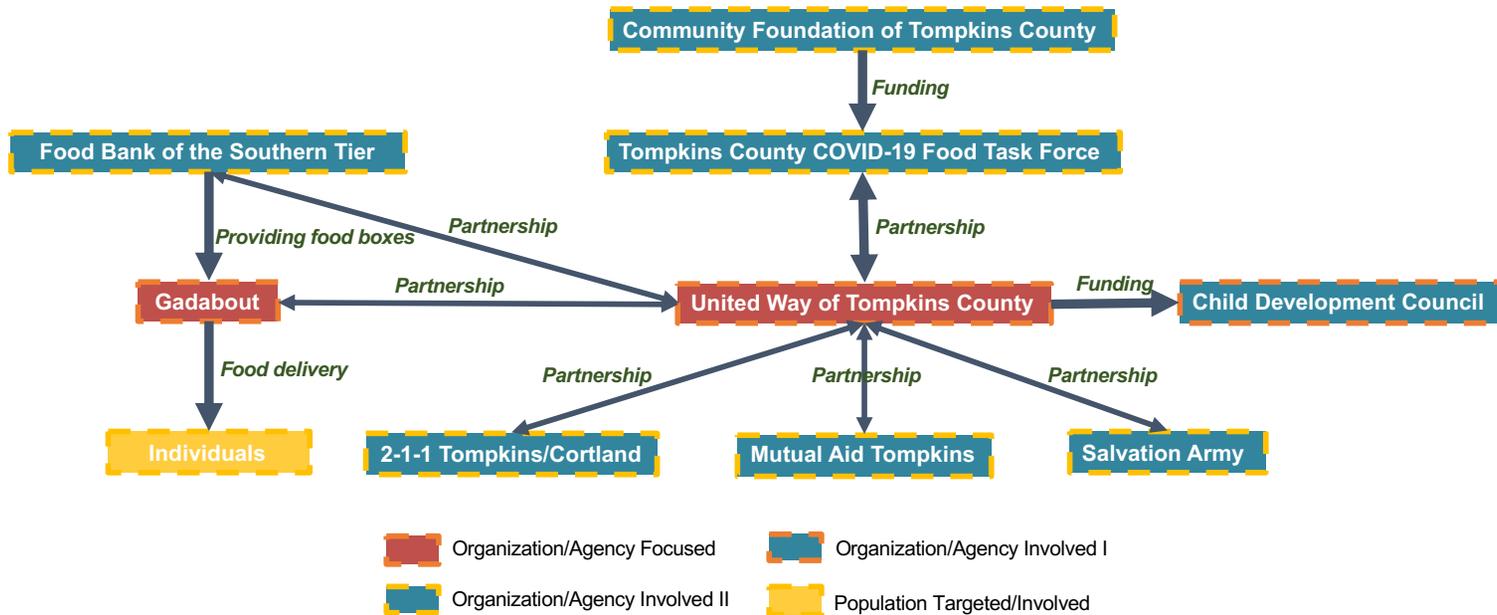
Foodnet Meals on Wheels - Focused Collaboration

In the very beginning, Foodnet Meals on Wheels packed 14 emergency frozen meals for every single one of their clients, and for new admissions. They came together with volunteers, United Way and also a food vendor who lent a refrigerated trailer. They managed to pack and deliver an additional 8,750 meals that first week, and keep enough on hand for new admissions. They also partnered with Food Bank of the Southern Tier and delivered some emergency meal boxes. With the stimulus funding provided by Tompkins County Office for the Aging, Foodnet Meals on Wheels was able to procure some additional shelf stable meals and deliver them to clients. Beechtree Center for Rehabilitation and Nursing also packed personal hygiene bags for many of Foodnet’s clients.



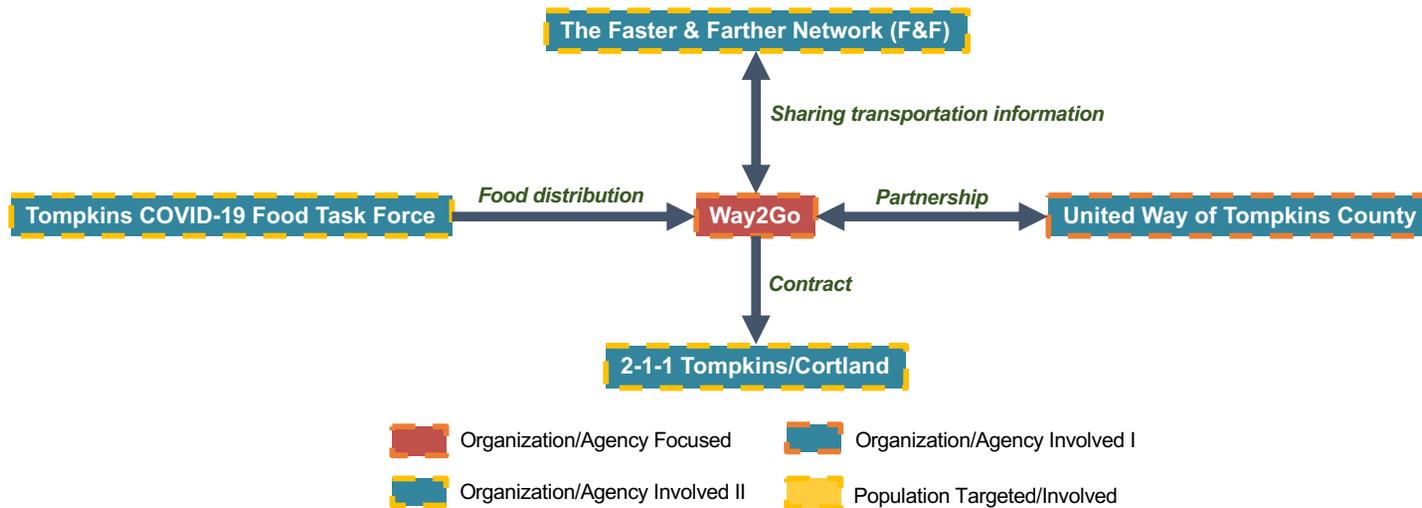
Child Development Council - Focused Collaboration

The Child Development Council partnered with the Friendship Donations Network which collected food from grocery stores and distributed food boxes and baby formula to families. They also partnered with Gadabout. Staff at Gadabout came to the office on Thursdays and picked up the packed supplies, and then delivered these supplies to families in need. The Child Development Council also partnered with local school districts, which were using school buses to deliver meals to families. Families who were requesting supplies, and if they had a school-age child in the participating school districts, the Child Development Council could pack their supplies and get to the school district, and the school would deliver the baby supplies along with their meals.



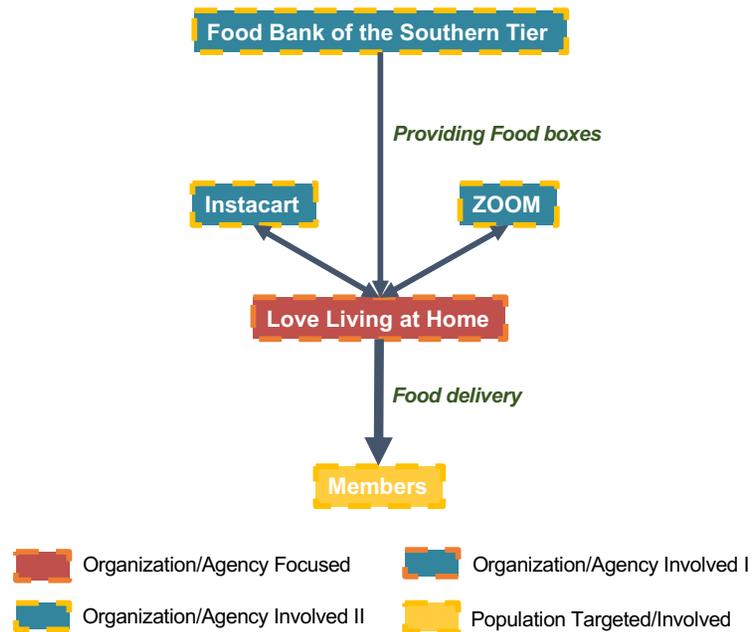
Gadabout & UWTC - Focused Collaboration

For individuals who want food but are not connected to an organization, United Way of Tompkins County (UWTC) can support their needs. Anyone, regardless of age and ability who needs food, could call 211. 211 does the initial screening to find out if they are able to get to a local food pantry and gives them options. Then 211 will deliver a list to the UWTC, and the UWTC would transfer that list over to Gadabout, and Gadabout would pick up food boxes at the Southern Tier Food Bank drop off locations and deliver to individuals. Regarding financial support, Kristen Wells at Gadabout said, “We’ve been fortunate enough to receive some of the CARES Act funding for transportation for Tompkins County and also some FEMA funding that we were able to use for food delivery.” Tompkins County is also rich in philanthropy, so Gadabout could turn to one of the local funding institutions and appeal for help to continue delivery. United Way of Tompkins County is one of the fundraising organizations which plays a convener role that connects agencies with each other, and they listen to the needs of the community and then seek resources to get things done. For example, they provided funding to the Child Development Council for meeting families’ needs for baby supplies due to COVID-19 impacts on their households.



Way2Go - Focused Collaboration

Way2Go was contracting with 211 to take transportation related calls. Actually, 211 became the centralized hub during COVID-19, where people could call to get services, to have questions answered, and to get help with food delivery. The community all came together and referred people to 211, and Way2Go kept them updates with any changes in services. In collaboration with the Tompkins Food Task Force, Way2Go participated in conversations around food distribution to help solve transportation issues. They also partnered with UWTC to connect groups for food collection and distribution with volunteer drivers. Way2Go had a listserv called the Faster & Farther Network (F&F), for people who are interested in transportation, and for human service professionals who share transportation information with people with whom they work. They were constantly sending out updates of the transportation landscape to the Faster & Farther listserv and their website.



LLH - Focused Collaboration

For Love Living at Home, they picked up food boxes from the TC3 Food Bank and delivered them to their members who needed food. They helped do shopping by gathering lists and shopping for up to 20 people, or assisted members through Instacart platform every week. Members of Love Living at Home were staying connected with phone calls and through ZOOM programming.

Opportunities for the future

The cross-agency collaboration during the COVID-19 pandemic in Tompkins County shows how the dynamics of power were applied differently in response to the crisis. Higher levels of collaboration were required to make the whole food supply system stronger and more reliable. “Learning flexibility is the key to life,” said Brandi Remington from UWTC, “Flexibility has helped us move faster. We didn't even know we could move faster. It has helped us to be able to get the money - money out to agencies who need it a lot quicker. Before the COVID hit, we would never have thought that was possible. So now we are going through and looking at other parts.” It probably makes sense to think deeper about how the community can move beyond this collaboration and push forward.

Hopefully in the future, we will be able to reach out more to grocery stores for delivery, or to the Food Bank for food pantries, as there are the whole groups of working families we have not reached. There are many individuals who have lost their jobs during the crisis. In some sense, the kids continue to get food from school, and older adults continue to get food from Foodnet, but tens of thousands of people in Tompkins County who lost their jobs didn't get anything. So, in the future, a more comprehensive system needs to address this challenge. We need to see how we can reach out to food pantries with an innovative system, and how we can reach out to grocery stores, for easier access and distribution.

FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

For future development, innovation is key. In this report of best practices on food delivery, Tompkins County organizations have demonstrated an innovative approach. Innovative use of Way2Go, school buses, and Gadabout, has brought about new solutions to transportation problems. Gadabout and school buses never carried food before COVID-19. Just like the technological innovation that provides a bright new way for our social connection, the driving force of institutional innovation is our willingness to try something radically new and different, like sending food on school buses and Gadabout. So when we move further, new questions are raised. Could we do that with medicine? Could we send medicine on Gadabout? After all, the purpose of technological innovation and institutional innovation is to make our life easier.

Regarding the topic of food insecurity and health inequity, we saw much progress and social change to which policymakers and grassroots organizations are committed. Cheryl Jewell at LLH said, “We want to make sure everyone has the food that they need. For some of the older adults, having fruits and vegetables is not easy, because their money goes to other things, and they don't get much in food stamps (SNAP).” Lisa Monroe at COFA said, “We called around to all the stores to see if there was going to be senior shopping hours, and if people could use their SNAP benefit cards there, and we created a list of that.” Recently, the measures of increasing SNAP benefits and allowing people to use SNAP for grocery store home delivery were put forward to support the food and nutrition needs of people who are suffering from a financial hardship. These are really meaningful initiatives that would help a lot of people through their difficult days at home with their families. On a global basis, food insecurity and health inequity are a long-term issue that needs to be addressed by the joint efforts of society. When the COVID-19 is cleared away in the near future, will our concern about food insecurity also disappear?

Unfortunately, this pandemic has underscored how social determinants impact health equity. Structural racism directly contributes to poverty and hunger, with higher rates of hunger among African American seniors. “The pandemic has amplified the inequities that exist,” said Jessica Gosa, the Executive Director of Foodnet Meals on Wheels, “Senior malnutrition has always been complex. That hasn't changed with the pandemic. Health disparities have always been here, before 2020. But this pandemic, with all the racial violence, and the mass exposure of inequity, the social determinants of health, and how that impacts health equity, leaves us saying, ‘What action can we take as a system; what can we do differently?’ We don't have all the answers for that, not yet, but we are committed. This work is going to take talking to lots of partners, having difficult discussions, listening, learning, and understanding our role. It is going to mean taking a very active look at our policies, practices, and our programming internally and committing to action steps.