

PANDEMIC AAR AGENCY INPUT

Agency: Washington State Department of Agriculture

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Executive Summary

The input provided by WSDA aims to support the Washington State Military Department's Emergency Management Division (EMD) and the Washington State Department of Health (DOH) as co-chairs the Pandemic After Action Review Task Force, in their effort to conduct a comprehensive after-action review of the statewide pandemic response and recovery.

Of the eight areas specifically listed in legislation established by SB 5092 (9)(d)(i) (A)-(H), WSDA's After Action Report input are most relevant to the following:

- (A) Aspects of the COVID-19 response that may inform future pandemic and all-hazards responses.
- (D) Whether establishing regional emergency management agencies would benefit Washington state emergency response to future pandemics
- (H) Implementing guidelines for school closures during a pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted multiple components of the food system, affecting the food supply and greatly reducing consumer purchasing power. Food production, processing, and delivery systems continue to experience instability. There remains an unprecedented need for public assistance programs, including support and food from local food banks.

Throughout 2020, Washington State Department of Agriculture (WSDA) played a key role in the state's response to increased food insecurity caused by COVID-19. As additional relief funding has been made available to support hunger relief operations, WSDA has engaged stakeholders through ongoing communication with Food Assistance contractors and subcontractors and through other informal channels. WSDA has worked in close cooperation with the Governor's office and other state agencies beginning in March 2020 to ensure the continuous operation of hunger relief organizations to meet the needs of a growing number of food insecure Washingtonians. Human resources persisted as an ongoing challenge, as the pre-pandemic workforce consisted primarily of volunteers, many in population groups of higher risk to COVID. Through a multi-agency partnership and approach, Washington State Department of Agriculture partnered with Department of Commerce to launch a program, *COVID Hunger Relief Staffing & Services*, to support emergency food programs and senior nutrition program services and operations in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts. Sites contracted with the Washington State Department of Agriculture's Food Assistance Programs and/or the Department of Social and Health Service's Senior Nutrition Programs were selected as locations to receive human resources to support their safe operation for the duration of the coronavirus pandemic.

Agency Impact – Externally

Key Issues:

- Food supply chain disruptions (procurement delays/declining donations)
- Food distribution model disruptions and frequent adaptations
- Emergency food system capacity constraints (cold and dry storage, human resource shortages, etc.)
- Rates of food insecurity doubled; peak demand 1 in 3

Key Responses:

- Increased food supply (fresh produce boxes, shelf stable food boxes, meat, fish, dairy, prepared meal pilots)
 - Established emergency food and supplies reserves and warehousing
 - Procurement of PPE and distribution supplies, including water
 - Increased operational funding and capacity grant opportunities for hunger relief organizations
 - National Guard deployment coordination
 - Applied for the USDA Disaster Household Distribution plan (approved for April, May and June)
 - Regular stakeholder calls and increased guidance for hunger relief sector
- I. On February 10, 2021, the Washington Legislature passed Engrossed House Bill 1368, which appropriated additional federal funding for high-need critical COVID-19 response programming across the state, including funding for WSDA to continue providing aid to hunger relief organizations through June 30, 2021.
- a. WSDA's Primary Objective – Ensure access to a safe and nutritious supply of food to support a healthy and thriving Washington population.
 - b. Additional Objectives –
 - i. Increase the economic viability of farmers and food businesses, with resources prioritized for underrepresented farmers and ranchers, as well as women, minority, and small business owners.
 - ii. Bolster and pursue access improvements within the Food Assistance contactor network
 - iii. Reach outside of the existing Food Assistance network to find HRO's serving BIPOC and socially disadvantaged communities that are not otherwise well served in the existing network or that need additional support; work toward a more inclusive future and enhanced coordination between this network and the Food Assistance network
 - c. Agency programming includes:
 - i. Enhanced Food Assistance Programs;
 - ii. Food infrastructure and market access grants that assist farms, food processors, and food distributors to pivot to new markets and business models, with additional funds for grants, prioritized for women, minority, and small business owners;
 - iii. Expanding the Farm to School program, to provide grants to schools to buy local foods;
 - iv. Develop a state alternative to the Farmers to Families Food Box Program;
 - v. Equity in Agriculture staffing and coordination with the WA Office of Equity;

- vi. Implement a meat and poultry grant program to promote strong supply chains.
- II. The USDA Farmers to Families Food Box program ended on May 31, 2021. Governor Inslee signed the budget appropriating \$27M for SFY22 on May 18, 2021 for WSDA to develop a state alternative with the dual objectives of supporting WA agricultural and food producers and fighting hunger.
 - a. In May, the USDA CFAP program was still distributing approx. 54,000 food boxes each week, comprised of produce, dairy and meat. Only 25% of these boxes were being distributed directly from the vendor to WSDA Food Assistance Contractors and/or Subcontractors. The majority of the gap will be experienced by out-of-network organizations and communities across WA.
 - b. Next Steps Included:
 - i. Outreach to all direct from vendor CFAP recipients to understand their programming and who they serve;
 - ii. July-September Director-driven bridge strategies, including support for Food Assistance's fresh box program, and targeted, contracts to mitigate short-term food crisis.
 - iii. A comprehensive Food System needs assessment with UW and WSU using various data sources, including the WAFOOD and WAFARM findings, to help identify who is being missed within the known hunger relief channels and how we might best overcome access barriers.
 - iv. Stakeholder engagement for program development will begin in July, and the new program was slated to launch October 2021.
- III. WSDA recognizes that each community and organization has unique circumstances, and has tried to implement strategies that address the greatest common needs across the state while maintaining flexibility to address a constantly evolving emergency food system crisis.
- IV. In addition to the appropriation, WSDA managed a FEMA Public Assistance grant – that allowed for additional food and PPE purchases, including an additional reserve of pre-packed shelf stable food boxes, and the management of two WSDA-operated emergency food distribution facilities in Arlington and Fife.
- V. National Guard deployment in hunger relief missions were authorized through July 2021, with deployment levels decreasing gradually to meet other state objectives like vaccination efforts.
 - a. As an interim solution for staffing resources at food banks, following the conclusion of National Guard support, WSDA partnered with Dept. of Commerce on \$10.73 million in CDBG-CV funding for COVID Hunger Relief Staffing & Services with Eligible Employment Security Dept./Washington Service Corps and Washington's Workforce Development Councils by employing 300 staff within food banks and senior nutrition programs across the state. <https://www.commerce.wa.gov/serving-communities/community-development-block-grants/cares-act-community-development-block-grant/>

Strengths

Lessons Learned:

- Interagency collaboration was critical.
- Stabilize emergency food supply by supporting WA food enterprises (farmers, distributors, processors)

- Food and supply reserves and warehousing necessary for steady emergency food supply
- Hunger relief organizations need more stable operating funds; over-reliance on philanthropy and volunteers is a vulnerability in a crisis
- State-level flexible funding was essential to fill gaps and make system improvements quickly
- USDA Disaster Household Plan needs to be coordinated with DSHS prior to applying
- Coordination amongst state agencies, hunger relief organizations, tribes and tribal organizations, and emergency management is critical (local, state, and federal)

Areas for Improvement

Critical Needs:

- Food pantry and meal program utilization remains 30-300% higher than 2019 levels, depending on the county; BIPOC and Latinx communities have experienced a disproportionate increase in food insecurity across WA
- The donated emergency food supply has not been fully restored and more food is needed
- Operating costs remain higher than pre-COVID due to new distribution models and PPE costs
- The volunteer workforce for hunger relief organizations remains limited and human resources are needed

Concerns Moving Forward:

- Ongoing food supply chain disruptions (reliability/timing/type/increased cost)
- Increased transportation and storage costs and availability limits
- Storage and distribution capacity (more is still needed)
- Anticipate long-term recovery (10+ years)
- Insufficient funding and/or at the “right” time from multiple state and federal sources
- Client intake barriers (USDA TEFAP does not have the ability to grant emergency client intake waivers)
- Frequency of emergencies will continue to increase (climate change, fires, outbreaks etc.)

In regards to *(H) Implementing guidelines for school closures during a pandemic:*

- The closure of schools, rendering the school meal program temporarily inaccessible, manifested a surge of demand elsewhere in the hunger relief system.
- If a future response action to statewide emergency requires school closures, time needs to be afforded for advanced planning efforts to occur across multiple agency involved in food and nutrition assistance programs and local jurisdictions/school districts, and OSPI to implement a rapid response to ensure food remains accessible to the school populations that depend on the school meal program.

Follow up Actions

- I. WSDA provided nearly \$15 million in small business assistance grants to help agriculture businesses and organizations in sectors that have been economically hurt due to marketplace disruptions created by the necessary public health measures during the COVID-19 pandemic.

- a. The WSDA Relief and Recovery Grants provided support to small businesses and organizations in four sectors that play an important role in the economic viability of Washington agriculture and have been economically impacted due to the COVID-19 public health emergency. This grant serves the public purpose of bolstering the viability of the Washington State agricultural industry, helping prevent business closures, and hence supporting the health and diversity of Washington State's economy.
 - b. WSDA allocated funds from the Disaster Response Account managed by the State of Washington Office of Financial Management, pursuant to Chapter 7, Laws of 2020 by providing WSDA Relief and Recovery Grants.
- II. WSDA Fresh Produce Boxes
- a. WSDA is developing a long-range plan to include implementation of a CFAP "style program" that focuses on equity, underserved communities, and economic vitality for local agriculture: building resiliency in the food system. This began in October, 2021.
 - b. July – Sept 2021:
 - i. Food Assistance supported WSDA Fresh Produce Boxes through September 30, 2021 by combining some of the 21-23 Biennial Food Assistance flexible funding with the WSDA food system resiliency funding.
 - ii. WSDA is also working on providing food to partners that are outside the traditional Food Assistance network and are reaching underserved communities.
 - iii. USDA has announced serious investments into these same areas. Some will be specific to TEFAP, local purchasing, and capacity grants.
- III. WSDA as sponsor agency, conducted the State Nutrition and Food Assistance Plan Workshop for Emergency Support Function 11 Appendix 1 on October 19-20, 2021
- a. The workshop was two half-days, total of eight-hours (distributed virtually)
 - b. The workshop outputs will inform the development of ESF 11 Appendix 1 to respond to a statewide food and nutrition assistance emergency.
 - c. Workshop was a result of a National Exercise Program award, as applied to by WSDA
 - d. Participating organizations included local, state, and federal agencies and hunger relief non-governmental organizations (NGOs)
 - e. Objectives included:
 - i. Identify agencies and organizations responsible to coordinate, lead and support state food and nutrition assistance response activities in times of statewide emergency.
 - ii. Identify the roles, responsibilities, capabilities of response partners in obtaining appropriate food supplies and arranging for delivery and movement of the supplies in times of statewide emergency.
 - iii. Identify coordination triggers among response partners to ensure a shared operational picture and common messaging.
 - iv. Identify critical communication pathways among response partners and how information is shared with impacted jurisdictions.

- v. Discover essential elements of information needed and the source or responsible organization to determine food and nutrition assistance needs in times of statewide emergency.
 - vi. Identify existing Federal-level, state-level, regional, local-level, private sector & NGO plans, policies, and/or Standard Operating Procedures that support ESF-11 in executing its assigned food and nutrition assistance responsibilities in times of statewide emergency.
- f. Several outcomes of this effort to be completed include the formation of a Washington State Food and Nutrition Emergency Coalition with representatives from agencies involved in the hunger relief network and the development of the ESF 11 Appendix 1 document.

Agency Impact – Internally/Interagency

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Washington State Department of Agriculture (WSDA) coordinated and executed a number of response and advanced planning activities – both for internal and external response action.

WSDA is the lead agency for Emergency Support Function (ESF) 11 (Agriculture and Natural Resources) under the State Comprehensive Emergency Management Plan. ESF-11 was activated at the State Emergency Operations Center (SEOC) 1/2020 and remained activated through December 2021. WSDA participated in advanced planning task force activities at the SEOC from February 2020.

Input reflects WSDA observations through involvement with the State EOC as a state agency as well as a response partner as a coordinating body of ESF 11. ESF 11 coordination under WSDA was conducted remotely in observance of NPIs. This posed initial challenges due to inadequate communication channels and support from Command and General Staff at the SEOC.

Initial and ongoing response tasks under ESF 11 included (list is not comprehensive, full documentation is available through internal agency situation reports and SEOC SitReps):

- Created multiple publications and resources for various food and animal/agriculture stakeholders related to COVID-19, NPI implementation, and essential business declarations.
- Identified grocery, food delivery, and pharmacy stakeholders in WA for SEOC advanced planning efforts
- Coordinated communication with stakeholders on current capabilities to expand curbside, home delivery, and drive thru options per social distancing recommendations.
- Provided guidance on food assistance options for children enrolled in school lunch programs when educational facilities are voluntarily closed.
- Provided contact information for Food Assistance Subject Matter Experts within WSDA to answer questions related to school food programs, emergency food assistance program, and to serve as a liaison to USDA food assistance and shared with SEOC.
- WSDA communications staff provided as a resource to the WA Military Department to assist in information gathering and dissemination.
- Provided staffing resources to meet staffing requests from DOH Incident Management Team (IMT).

- Provided internal and external risk communication coordinating efforts.
- WSDA Animal Services Division tracked state efforts of SARS-CoV-2 testing of animals in Washington State. An effort accomplished in partnership with WSDA and WSU - Washington Animal Disease Diagnostic Lab (WADDL) and reported to CDC.
- Facilitated workgroups with EMD, Commerce, workforce development councils, ESD, OFM, and National Guard to identify and apply for funding options to support food bank/pantry staffing after end of National Guard missions.
- Coordinated with ESF-6 (mass care) and ESF-20 (National Guard) to confirm approved levels of National Guard support at food banks/pantries.
- Participated in the One Health State-Federal COVID-19 weekly synchronization meetings with a focus on federal coordination with STLT partners on One Health issues relevant to COVID-19, including animal testing, diagnostics, research and other issues at the human-animal-environment interface within the United States. This weekly meeting included state public health veterinarians, state animal health officials, and state wildlife health officials.
- Coordinated with the Governor's Office and Farm Bureau on the distribution of hand sanitizer and masks to agricultural workers.
- Coordinated with State Pharmacy board and the Distiller's Guild for the allowance of hand sanitizer manufacturing at distilleries.
- Participated on a multi-stakeholder team to develop a statewide strategy for PPE sourcing and distribution as part of the statewide COVID-19 Pandemic Health Response. The team is led by Vice Admiral Bono (ret.) at the direction of the Governor.
- Participated in weekly Alaska, Washington, and Oregon synchronization meetings with an emphasis on current or emerging needs/concerns specific to commercial fisheries, fishing vessels, and industry.
- COVID-19 related customer information maintained here: <https://agr.wa.gov/about-wsda/news-and-media-relations/covid-19>

Additionally, initial internal agency actions related to components of its Continuity of Operations Plan (COOP) included:

- Reviewed and updated Mission Essential Functions
- Updated an agency Pandemic Plan
- Posted preventive measures guidance throughout NRB to ensure consistent messaging throughout the Natural Resources Building.
- Hosted meetings with IT Operations Manager to determine how the agency will coordinate meeting essential functions with teleworking options.
- Migrated a majority of staff to a remote working environment.
- Supported staff to maintain in-person activities as needed essential business by order of the Governor.
- Created various response tools for supervisors, managers, and HR for COVID-19 response prior to the development of the Healthy Washington Guide for State Agencies.

Strengths

ESF 11 coordination under WSDA was conducted remotely in observance of NPIs. This posed initial challenges due to insufficient communication channels and support at the SEOC due to limited remote capabilities across state agency networks. However, throughout the response, several strengths were identified in overcoming initial challenges.

- Feedback to/from Operations Section improved through the duration of the response.
 - Recommendations: Daily huddles help continuity of information sharing within operations chain of command (ESF lead to HSB Director to OSC). Recommend a consistent/mandated on day shadow/overlap between staffing rotations for Command staff (ex. Operations Section and Logistics) to ensure retention of information shared, on-going tactics, etc.
 - Maintain a hybrid posture – ensure information is shared equally and adequately across both a virtual platform as well as in-person.
- Service agency coordination between ESF-6, service agencies, and Human Services Branch increased in response effectiveness and efficiency.
 - Recommendations: The forward-leaning approach to arranging a Volunteer and Donation Group within ESF 6 was essential in having structure and viable solutions to the ballooning staffing demand at food banks/pantries. This enhanced the capability of HSB to build tactics to meet objectives once the branch was stood up.
- Strong ESF to ESF communication throughout response, focusing on resource/guidance sharing and operational tactics.
 - Recommendations: Engaging in coordination calls, including Business and Information Structure Branch enhanced situational awareness and coordination capability. Daily/weekly ESF huddles help continuity of information.
 - ESFs should be made aware of different branch SOPs.

Areas for Improvement

- The inability for the SEOC to maintain consistent and standardized county messaging and feedback loops created severe resource demands on WSDA to manage, when engaged in the agency's response to support the food bank network directly.
 - Recommendations: Establish early on a process for communicating with all impacted counties, whether it be a recurring call, MS Teams channel, etc. Fully utilize the SEOC county liaisons already embedded in some counties and if those positions do not exist, look into the feasibility of creating them.
 - Provide SEOC support to state agencies that are immersed in response activities. It is the responsibility of the SEOC to help facilitate coordination with the counties, of which was a failure during the initial ramp up to support food banks. WSDA immediately began support of the food bank stakeholders to supply the resources they needed, including staffing support – these stakeholders have a direct relationship with WSDA and if it was needed for the counties to have situational awareness during the emergency, triangulation through SEOC coordination was the resource and support WSDA needed.

- The lack of continuity of information between Human Service Branch Director staffing rotation resulted in repeated duplication of effort, amidst strained resources for WSDA. Insufficient information shared between branch directors delayed response efforts further for WSDA.
 - Recommendations: Develop a HSB SOP and include emphasis/intent during every operational period transition to have outgoing staff brief incoming staff in a way that allows for actionable follow-up.
- SEOC delay in developing and/or releasing an organizational chart. Given the nature of the disaster (pandemic) and associated response efforts (NPIs) – many activated to the response had done so remotely. Because the nature of WebEOC is less visually accessible, a basic ICS organizational chart is helpful and useful. The delay in the document development and release to response partners in a timely matter caused confusion. The chart remained inaccessible for quite a duration even following the transition to UAC.
 - Recommendations: Develop an organization chart per standard ICS and ensure remote response partners can readily access the organization chart and related resources.
- Situational awareness around the status of resource deliveries, quantities, etc. from the Logistics Section remained insufficient. Resource requests submitted by WSDA for WSDA employees as well as for food bank partners largely went unfilled without any communication
 - Recommendations: Build into Logistics Section and Operations Section procedures to routinely report out status of resource requests once they are procured to point of distribution. This specific response is particularly challenging due to backordered and donated supplies as well as variable delivery patterns, however, any feedback that is available is appreciated so all coordinating partners can effectively accept the resources and use them to their fullest utility.
 - Do not communicate to state agencies that resource requests should be submitted to the SEOC for fulfillment, if this is unachievable. Allow state agencies to explore their own means without further delay if support is inadequate.
 - Gaps and limitations in the system should be communicated early so that state agencies do not suffer lack of action of their own means as a result of waiting on support through the SEOC.
- The failure of the SEOC to stand up the Human Services Branch within the initial weeks of the incident response – in sync the expected impacts (outlined through advanced planning efforts WSDA contributed to the SEOC on 2/2020) in anticipation of a surge of need and demand on food banks/pantries, other hunger relief organizations and the demand on expanding human need resulted in a severe resource demand on WSDA.
 - Recommendations: Refer to the advanced planning materials submitted by state agencies so that the SEOC can better prepare rather than delay and react. It is a failure to ask state agencies to contribute subject matter expertise if these resources are not to be used – it is another demonstration of wasted resources, time, and effort.
 - Establish an appropriate response structure, including the Human Services Branch early in response efforts as need illustrated through advanced planning efforts (efforts recorded weekend of Feb 27, 2020).

Follow up Actions (intent to change plans, policies, or procedures)

- A re-evaluation of the function and operation of the SEOC is needed, especially on how the SEOC/EMD engages with other state agencies. Too often did this response result in demands and asks from the SEOC that resulted in unclosed communication loops or lack of communication loops, lack of visibility, lack of coordination, and unfilled resource requests. There should be proper communication established with state agency SALs, and full visibility of communication should be provided, especially in cases when the SEOC is seeking information from a state agency. Too often were emails sent without context or directed to the wrong agency POC. The purpose of the SAL is to serve as the coordinating agent for that state agency to the SEOC – this channel should be used and respected.
- If the SEOC is unable to support the needs of a state agency or coordinate with a state agency both appropriately through policy and operations concurrently, then this limitation needs to be communicated early on so that the state agency can devise solutions through their existing networks and develop a system that will help uphold the mission of the agency.