

School Districts' Efforts to Reduce Food Insecurity in California's San Joaquin Valley during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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BACKGROUND

- Food insecurity, which is linked to poor health and learning, has tripled during the pandemic
- School meals are critical to reducing child food insecurity
- School closures disrupted access to child nutrition programs

OBJECTIVE

- Explore multi-stakeholder perspectives of school meal provision during COVID-19

COMMUNITY-ACADEMIC PARTNERSHIP

- **Community Partners:** Dolores Huerta Foundation and Cultiva La Salud, community-based organizations (CBOs) working on social justice and health equity in the San Joaquin Valley (SJV)
- **Academics:** Stanford and UC Nutrition Policy Institute

METHODS

- 6 SJV school districts
- Semi-structured interviews with school district officials and CBOs (n=11)
- Focus groups with parents of students (n=23 Spanish, 6 English)
- Explored challenges and assets of school meal programs during COVID-19 school closures
- Data recorded and transcribed.
- Themes identified through iterative team-based coding

Figure 1. A batched breakfast and lunch meal offered to students at one of the six SJV districts.



Multi-level efforts were essential to driving the success of COVID-19 school meal programs



STAKEHOLDER TESTIMONY

“COVID definitely ... terrifies our families. So we were very fortunate when the USDA approved for parents to come pick-up meals without having their children in the vehicle with them or walking to the site and not having their children with them.”
– Food Service Director

“There are some regions with high numbers of families working in the fields that don't have as great access to technology that we would pass on flyers and information. But we did a lot of work on social media so that made me think we are doing enough for families who are not as active on the internet or only have calls or texts” – Food Service Director

“ “[I picked up] the same food for four days [in a row]. So, I stopped going. I really enjoyed the fresh fruit and vegetables, but definitely not the canned food. I thought they were getting too much bready food and it was not healthy. I really liked the fresh options.” – Parent

LESSONS LEARNED

- Rapidly changing conditions, increased operation costs (PPE, food packaging), and limited resources presented barriers to programming efforts.
- COVID-19 federal administrative flexibilities were key to providing meals during the pandemic
- Easy access (ie. text, phone) and peer-to-peer communication were successful in reaching families
- Pre-packaged and processed meals were perceived as unhealthy, monotonous, and unappealing
- Families desire a vehicle to provide input on meals and future program efforts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Culturally and linguistically appropriate, accessible information is critical to reaching families
- Bi-directional school-to-home and home-to-school communication is needed to increase family participation and reduce food insecurity
- Fresh, appealing, varied, child-friendly and culturally appropriate meals could boost participation.

NEXT STEPS

- Identifying platforms to increase community, parent, and school communication
- Improving school meal appeal and parent perception to increase participation

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