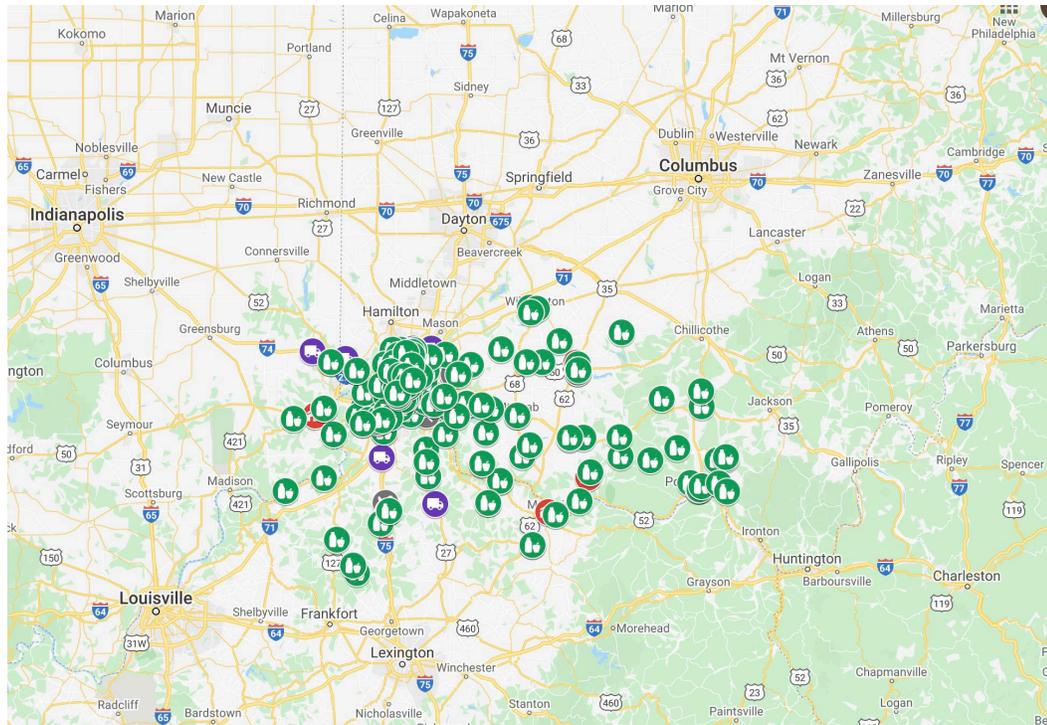


The mission of the Free Store Foodbank (FSFB) is to improve lives by eliminating hunger in partnership with the community. The Freestore Foodbank provides 37.7 million meals annually through a network of over 540 community organizations in 20 counties throughout Ohio, Kentucky and Indiana. The Freestore Foodbank is also the largest provider of emergency food and services in the tristate area and played a huge role in providing meals to the tristate area when the COVID pandemic began.



*Figure 1.* Freestore Foodbank locations of all food pantries, pop-ups, homeless shelters, and soup kitchens (Ohio, Indiana, Kentucky).

At the beginning of the COVID crisis, there was a sudden uptick in demand for food on multiple fronts. Citizens who had been laid off found themselves in need of foodbank services for the first time. In addition, schools moved to online education, and students who previously received breakfast and/or lunch at school found themselves in search of meals at home. Simultaneously, FSFB found themselves with less help due to the loss of volunteers. To meet the surge in demand, the Ohio National Guard mobilized to ensure that tristate citizens were fed.<sup>1</sup> On a smaller scale, the HHMM had to adjust from allowing patrons to enter the mobile market and select food for themselves, to creating a pre-order sheet for the patrons, and having staff pick food and provide it to them.

🍏 FRUIT	🌿 VEGETABLES	● DRY GOODS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Apples \$.50 each</li> <li>• Oranges \$.50 each</li> <li>• Bananas \$.50/ lb</li> <li>• Grapes \$1.50- \$2.50/lb</li> <li>• Pears \$.45 each</li> <li>• Plums \$.70 each</li> <li>• Pineapple \$2 each</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tomato \$1/lb</li> <li>• Collard greens \$.60/ bunch</li> <li>• Romaine Lettuce \$1.50/ head</li> <li>• Cucumbers \$.60 each</li> <li>• Green onions \$.50/ bunch</li> <li>• Broccoli \$1.50/ bunch</li> <li>• Cabbage \$.60/ lb</li> <li>• Zucchini \$.70 each</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Eggs \$2</li> <li>• Bread \$1.75</li> <li>• Shelf-stable milk \$1.50/ qt.</li> <li>• Peanut Butter \$1.50</li> <li>• Whole Wheat Tortillas \$1.50</li> <li>• Beans (Pinto, Black, Gr. North) \$1/lb</li> <li>• Hot Sauce \$1/ small bottle</li> <li>• Spices \$1 each</li> </ul>

*Figure 2. Available produce at HHMM (healtyharvestmobilemarket.com)*

The COVID-19 pandemic had an extraordinary impact on the Freestore Food Bank as well as the Bond Hill community it serviced. Widespread lockdowns forced residents to stay in their homes with minimal human interaction or risk being infected by COVID. The effects this had on mental health and wellbeing will not be fully known for a while but it is sufficient to say it was significant and unlike any other time in history. Desperate times called for desperate measures, and the Healthy Harvest Mobile Market had to close down as a result.

The pandemic also caused a cataclysmic shift in the food supply chain. Before COVID, the Freestore Foodbank normally relied more heavily on food donations as opposed to monetary donations. When the food supply chain was rattled by COVID, food donations from the community and Kroger dropped 42%, according to our community partner. The Freestore Foodbank had to then shift to sourcing their own food, which was supported by a record \$1 million raised in April 2020.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, the Freestore Foodbank received more funds from Feeding America, which received extra support particularly from a \$100 million donation from Jeff Bezos.<sup>1</sup>

Organizational change at the beginning of the project also had an impact on our ability to best serve our community. This year, we had a new contact from FSFB helping us to coordinate our project, who was new to the community partner role. Going through that transition while FSFB was already facing many logistical and financial changes due to the pandemic made it difficult to have consistent communication and a clear plan for how our project could be most helpful. Additionally, while we were able to safely volunteer in-person at FSFB once, this experience made it difficult to understand the organization's larger scale impact and day-to-day functioning. While we could also distribute the surveys in pairs in-person, we were limited by the locations and hours of the HHMM. Finally, as we were planning our community project during COVID, we decided to work with the HHMM overall, rather than a single FSFB location in one neighborhood to maximize our impact despite restrictions.



*Figure 3. Learning Community 5 preparing power-packs at Freestore Foodbank.*

Serving over 10,000 people in underserved neighborhoods of Cincinnati, the Healthy Harvest Mobile Market is an integral part of the community receiving proper goods and produce. Because the Freestore Foodbank and Healthy Harvest Mobile Market serves such a large population, it relies on many volunteers to keep operations running effectively and efficiently to meet the needs of the community. However, because of the pandemic, the Freestore Foodbank was not able to safely host the usual amount of volunteers. After the initial support from the Ohio National Guard, the distribution of food was not able to occur at the usual rates, affecting the community's access to these products.

Furthermore, COVID-19 affects high-risk populations<sup>2</sup> (those with obesity, diabetes, asthma/chronic lung disease, sickle cell disease, or immunosuppressed individuals) more severely, meaning that many people in the population we were serving decided not to come to the Freestore Foodbank anymore. The pandemic forced these people to make a choice between their food accessibility and physical well-being, all while balancing taking care of family, friends, and managing other obligations such as work. As a result, many people did not get the benefits that come with the Freestore Foodbank.

The Produce Prescription (PRx) program, utilized by the HHMM, is an incentive for people to make use of primary care offices in the area. If a community member sees a healthcare provider, they can receive a \$25 voucher towards the HHMM. However,

determinants such as unreliable transportation, lack of insurance, low health literacy, and low social capital left a lot of the members of our community without basic primary care needs and impeded primary care and clinic visitations. The low attendance to primary care offices may have contributed to decreased the use of the Produce Prescription (PRx) program. In the survey we collected, there was a very low utilization of PRxs and even no utilization at the Evanston location. This voucher program, with effective promotion and increased participation, is one of the strongest intercommunity tools led by HHMM and a potential avenue for improvement.

As noted above, the Freestore Foodbank has an extensive mission, serving 37.7 million people each year. While the organization requires many resources to function this broadly, their main need is fresh food. As students and future physicians, this is one way in which we can help our community partner by seeking out opportunities to acquire food and fill their demands.

The interplay between nutrition, both in terms of general access and quality, is a well-documented impact factor relating to the health of patients, particularly affecting those who lack it.<sup>3</sup> Students and doctors are in unique positions for advocacy as they are present to help manage the health-related conditions manifesting in a healthcare setting. Unsurprisingly this results in overlapping populations that they must serve as FreeStore Foodbank. It becomes much more difficult to ignore advocacy efforts when both the cause, food instability, and effect, healthcare need and outcome, are combined. In this way, the doctors and students represent a crucial component of effective advocacy, and the use of their voice in unison with FreeStore Foodbank has great potential for synergy.

Students and physicians can advocate for the needs of the FreeStore Foodbank and the communities affected by this organization by advocating for increased funding for the foodbank. Through projects like ours and collaborative efforts between the organizations and students, research can be compiled that helps indicate the significant need for increased funding by the foodbank, especially during the pandemic. In COVID-19, the demand for resources from the FreeStore Foodbank increased significantly due to increased unemployment and job insecurity, decreased facility density due to social distancing and staffing issues created by a lack of volunteers. Besides financial support, the Freestore Foodbank is in need of increased volunteers, a space that has become hard to fill in times of masks and social distancing. Ultimately, the increased demand for food and human resources has outweighed the resources the organization has. The role of students and physicians is more from a policy standpoint and compiling client

# Conclusions

- Learning Objective
  - 56 total surveys were distributed to HHMM locations at 3 different locations in Cincinnati
  - Obtained data on the demographics, frequency of utilization, payment methods, ease of access, primary point of medical care, health conditions, and perceived improvement of conditions
- Service Objective
  - Feedback on the HHMM was mostly very positive, demonstrating the importance of having accessible food in these communities
  - Several survey respondents emphasized that they would like more variety of foods and expanded access (more locations, longer hours)
  - Many survey respondents use more than one payment method (ex. SNAP and cash)
  - Produce RXs were used sparingly in lieu of other payment methods
  - This data can be utilized by Freestore Foodbank to better tailor their program to help the needs of the community



*Figure 4.* Conclusions from student-led presentation addressing points of need and future solutions for the HHMM.

There is a very important gap between having knowledge of a need for resources, and the effective implementation of a plan with an outcome that has actually addressed the need. FreeStore Foodbank serves communities that require these resources on the frontlines, as do doctors and students in the context of delivering healthcare. These experiences from different perspectives, on the same populations, on the ground level, provide important insight into the dynamics and specific targeted needs of the community. It is simply not enough to requisition resources for these communities from a birds-eye view, it must be coordinated to function efficiently and target the proper areas of highest need. This gap is the definition of effectiveness and therefore represents an opportunity to contribute to meaningful advocacy for doctors and students in conjunction with FreeStore Foodbank.

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3. Olson CM. Nutrition and Health Outcomes Associated with Food Insecurity and Hunger. *The Journal of Nutrition*. 1999;129(2). doi:10.1093/jn/129.2.521s