FFAR NEWS FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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FFAR-Funded Study Promotes Food Security During Pandemic

Washington, DC (October 14, 2020) — As the spread of coronavirus continues to disrupt the US economy, low-income households face a higher risk of food insecurity. This risk is more pronounced in families with school-age children who rely on food assistance programs, such as school lunch, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Women Infant Children (WIC) program. As part of a $482,642 grant from the Foundation for Food & Agriculture Research (FFAR), researchers at Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland State University, Colorado State University, Michigan State University, Ohio State University, the Sustainable Food Center, University at Albany and the UTHealth School of Public Health in Austin studied emergency food provisions that serve children and families in five US cities during the pandemic. The grant is an extension of a $1 million FFAR Tipping Points grant to reduce food insecurity. The additional funding allows the grantees to examine the trade-offs associated with policy and programming interventions in response to COVID-19.

The results were published in an Applied Economic Perspectives and Policy article, "Emergency Food Provision for Children and Families during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Examples from Five US Cities." The journal article shows that the success of emergency local programs depends on cross-sector collaboration among stakeholders, adaptable supply chains and addressing gaps in service to increased risk populations.

"No child should go hungry, during a pandemic or otherwise, and my heart goes out to families that struggled during the past year who couldn't access emergency food services," said FFAR Executive Director Dr. Sally Rockey. "This research helps ensure that emergency food services effectively serve children and their families throughout this pandemic and in the event of future crises."

While the federal government expanded funding for school breakfast and lunch programs and other food assistance programs in the spring of 2020, there was no federal mandate that the programs continue, or guidance for carrying them out. Thus, local governments devised their own plans to provide emergency food services to low-income families, to varying degrees of effectiveness. The researchers evaluated how emergency feeding programs, including SNAP, food banks and schools, distributed food during the pandemic; who used these services; the costs of these services; the food provided and its dietary quality. The research team conducted interviews and focus groups with emergency food service providers in five cities—the Albany, New York Capitol Region; Austin, Texas; Cleveland, Ohio; Denver, Colorado and Flint, Michigan—to understand how decisions by schools, governments and other emergency food service providers impacted access to food.

The researchers discovered that the success of local responses to low-income food insecurity depended on three factors:

1. *Cross-sector collaboration*: Cities with higher cross-sector participation among stakeholders were able to reach more families with nutrition and food needs. In Denver, for example, city and county officials had pre-pandemic working relationships in place with food rescue organizations to support food security efforts. Cities with low collaboration had more difficulties, such as Flint, where distrust in local authorities, a result of the ongoing water crisis, remains high.

2. *Adaptable supply chains*: Cities with adaptable supply chains also had more success at feeding their vulnerable populations. Flint and Cleveland experienced supply chain problems that limited the amount of food available to smaller food banks with less purchasing power. These issues required sourcing food from farther distances. In Denver, many of the smaller food banks closed at the beginning of the pandemic, and food banks were able to more efficiently handle increased demand. Additionally, many feeding programs experienced a drop in volunteers, making it harder to deliver food to those in need. Albany and Cleveland overcame this problem with distribution assistance from the National Guard.

3. *Addressing gaps in service to increased risk populations*: As COVID-19 disproportionately affects communities that are already underserved, it is essential to identify and address gaps in service to increased risk populations. As part of their emergency response plans, Austin and Denver have prioritized services to populations facing food insecurity. In Austin, the Office of Sustainability mapped emergency food resources and distribution sites and are identifying communities where food needs have increased since the start of the pandemic. Denver is developing a food security plan that will be incorporated into a broader socially equitable pandemic recovery plan.

"Our five research teams were already involved in mapping and modeling our urban food systems when the pandemic hit," said the report's corresponding author Dr. Becca Jablonski of Colorado State University. "This previous work, coupled with strong relationships with key food system stakeholders in each of our cities, put us in a position to act quickly to document changes within the emergency food service system due to COVID-19, and to begin to describe the effectiveness of interventions taken to respond to school closures. We hope that this research is useful in considering the tradeoffs associated with different types of responses as well and how to better prepare for future crises."

The researchers conclude that while different regional and local approaches to providing food security to low-income families and children is necessary to respond to specific contexts, more robust guidance from the federal government may improve the effectiveness of the responses.

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The Foundation for Food & Agriculture Research (FFAR), a 501 (c) (3) nonprofit organization originally established by bipartisan Congressional support in the 2014 Farm Bill, builds unique partnerships to support innovative and actionable science addressing today's food and agriculture

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