

2020-2021 Summary & Recommendations

The Tompkins COVID-19 Food Task Force was established in March 2020 by Kirby Edmonds, nonprofit leader of the Dorothy Cotton Institute; Rafael Aponte, farmer/owner of Rocky Acres Farm; Anna Kelles, a Tompkins County Legislator at the time, now NYS Assembly, and Rachel Bezner Kerr, faculty at Cornell University. Teams for coordination, food distribution, food production, and health and communications were convened, along with infrastructure to arrange meetings, set agendas, and gather resources. Over 80 local agencies participated along with individuals, farmers, and other local businesses. Full time staff support was hired in May, 2020 and housed at CCE Tompkins until May, 2021. CCE Tompkins continues to provide part time staff support for quarterly meetings of the food distribution team.

Strengths of the Tompkins COVID-19 Food Task Force

1. Collaboration among a diverse group of organizations, businesses, schools, and individuals
2. Transparent, open communication and data sharing between these partners, building trust and shared knowledge
3. Collective conversations that led to innovative program expansions to respond rapidly to changing needs
4. A consistent focus on equity
5. Resiliency through a common agenda and diversity

A resilient food system is able to withstand and recover from disruptions in a way that ensures a sufficient supply of acceptable and accessible food for all.

(Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future)

Accomplishments

1. Resiliency through a common agenda and diversity of membership
 - a. Increased referrals to organizations and volunteers that could best meet needs. The team informed social service and food system stakeholders and volunteers about current, shifting options and empowered them to share this information with individuals in the community.
 - b. Community Education through flyers, social media posts, 211 training and promotion, directory websites.
 - c. Program Expansion after communally determined needs assessments
 - i. the use of a dedicated cooler to move farm food through pantries and partners, still in use in 2022 under the management of CCE staff for farm to pantry work ([Nourish Tompkins](#)) and [Healthy Food For All](#) produce box distribution. This cooler has facilitated food distribution to farmworkers, members of the Cayuga Nation, pantries in King Ferry and Enfield and TC Action, to the chef at Gola and then on to The Jungle as packaged meals, as well as to individual households throughout the county.
 - ii. The creation of a mini grant program to support food distribution services by community members and small organizations. This led to \$7500 being distributed towards food delivery in The Jungle and at hotels, pop-up pantries at mobile home parks, and other immediate needs. Recipients included No Mas Lagrimas, Groton Food Providers, a former resident of The Jungle, and Village at Ithaca.
 - d. Direct Support was available as agencies and organizations identified service gaps and shared efforts to recruit volunteers, find accurate information, share staff support needs, and seek funds when needed.
 - i. CCE and the Farm Bureau worked together to supply masks, gloves, sanitizer, protocols, and eventually vaccines to farm workers.
 - ii. Locations for food cabinets from Mutual Aid Tompkins were identified and installed, with coordination and planning support from FTF members and staff provided when necessary.
 - iii. Gaps in pantry support on Friday evenings and holidays were filled by Mutual Aid Tompkins volunteers in coordination with 211, Friendship Donation Network, and GreenStar gift cards for special dietary needs made available from Healthy Food For All.



SWOT Analysis



Strengths

Institutional Knowledge

Our community grew stronger through this process. We gained Institutional Knowledge at the member organizations, which include the Health Department and other County offices, Human Services Coalition, United Way, Food Bank of the Southern Tier, Friendship Donations Network, TC Action, Pantry Partners, and Mutual Aid Tompkins, which grew rapidly to have an enormous impact.

Farmers, wholesalers, and processors, and groups like the Ithaca Farmers Market are continuing to expand local production, increase equity work, and build accessible food distribution systems within Tompkins. This work is now informed by the needs of resiliency and shock absorption.

Local retailers, hospitals, recovery centers, shelters, and other groups in town have learned not only to keep their own activities going amidst disruption, but also learned to branch out into food distribution. Some will continue that work and others will be able to jump back into it when needed.

It may appear inefficient to have a multitude of projects and initiatives taking place in our relatively small community, but it builds resilience because we are not dependent on a small number of informed leaders and we encourage innovation and involvement.

Communication Tools

Plans are in place so that we can rapidly form working groups again in the future. CCE Tompkins will continue to maintain tools in cooperation with the Food Policy Council and other critical partners and to make sure that a transition plan will be put into place if needed.

Community Engagement

Through good communication, we gain access to our greatest strength, the social capital in our community, which is ready to act again in the future and has shown a willingness to join efforts as well as initiate independent solutions. The grassroots empowerment that we have here will serve us well no matter what shocks we encounter in the future and should be considered in all our planning. There is so much resolve and power in the people here and it is important for each community leader and each institutional employee to communicate the message that we encourage everyone to contribute as they are able.

Weaknesses

Reliance on Federal and State Policies and Interventions.

Our local response operates in tandem with state and federal policies and regional food bank responses, regional and global supply chains, and the state of the broader economy. As changes are made at these broader levels, we are required to react and respond quickly. Some interventions are appropriate to conduct at the local level and some require advocacy to implement at the state, regional or federal level. When these broader interventions are weak and insufficient, then there is more work for us to do and that was part of what we lived through last year – a breakdown in appropriately scaled interventions at the federal and state level. The local community stepped in but it will wear down our local reserves if called upon to do this repeatedly.

Barriers to comprehensive local food production.

With our short growing season, undulating landscape, expensive land, and high costs of doing business, we are far from the point of self-sufficiency through local food production, especially in some categories, such as grains, legumes, and spices. The trucks that bring in our food need to keep coming in order for us to feed ourselves in Tompkins.

Threats

Economic and Regulatory Uncertainty

Some of the threats that we face come from continued uncertainty about the broader economy, costs of energy and food, and the state and federal response.

Climate Change

In addition, there is the real potential that any of these threats could become exacerbated through climate changes and the resulting shifts in our ecology, economy, and socio-political environment.

We face the near certainty that as the southern states heat up, more people will move to this area, requiring additional food, housing, and other services.

There is potential for additional invasive species, such as the spotted lantern fly, that will threaten our crops and local ecology. Extreme weather events may also threaten crops with late and early frosts, damage from hail or flooding, drought, or extreme summer heat.

Opportunities

Increasing local food production.

While we can never grow all the food we need, we can still improve the proportion of locally grown food in our supply chains. Hoop houses and greenhouses can extend the growing season. Food production can be actively encouraged through local incentives and land management practices. And there is a lot of momentum in urban agriculture through partnerships between the Quarter Acre for the People project led by Christa Nunez, Groundswell, Urban Core, and other incredibly active community members. Urban Agriculture has the ability to grow more food, create small businesses and jobs, and increase opportunities for BIPOC community members to get involved in the local food system.

Affordable Food Initiatives

In 2021, Tom Vilsak, the returning head of the USDA, reframed the problem of hunger in America as one of nutritional security. There will be more USDA money put into nutrition incentive programs such as farm market checks, prescription produce programs, and other supplements to SNAP and WIC that place nutrient-dense foods at the heart of hunger relief work. We have a great deal of these programs already running here in Tompkins food organizations involved in making sure that we implement all of them here locally.

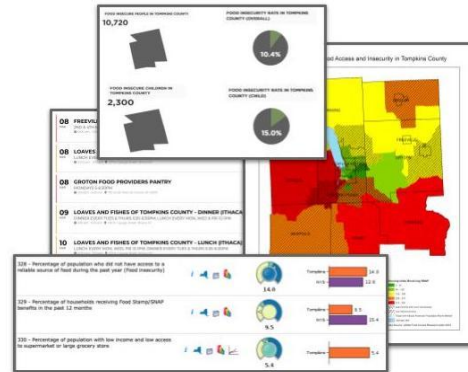
Systemic Approaches to Food Insecurity

There is great potential to expand the conversation on the relationship between meeting immediate needs and addressing the root causes of hunger. Distribution team members often express the desire to become obsolete, but we see the need day in and day out and so that work cannot stop. Working in cooperation with groups that are addressing the root causes of hunger and are advocating for changes is inspiring and motivating. That peer-to-peer learning and support provides hope and perspective. The Childhood Nutrition Collaborative has put resources towards this work as have many other local community groups and members of the Food Task Force can advocate for those changes and actively participate in shifting the landscape away from downstream relief work.

Food Systems Dashboard

Members of the COVID-19 Food Task Force formed a dashboard working group to explore options for information sharing and analysis in our county. This group includes representatives from the Human Services Coalition, the Health Planning Council, CCE Tompkins, Tompkins Food Future, Tompkins County, and advice from economic development and community information experts. A framework has been developed that requires approximately \$185,000 to execute and maintain.

This project will provide equal access to food system information that educates and engages residents in a civic conversation about policy recommendations, program improvements and new initiatives. With access to food system metrics and stories, agencies, policy makers, business owners, residents with new ideas, and residents seeking options will make informed decisions that have significant impacts on health, environmental impact, economic development, and quality of life.



Tompkins Food Future

Lessons from the 2020-2021 COVID-19 food crisis have been integrated into the Tompkins Food System Plan proposed by the Food Policy Council in the spring of 2022. Accepting this plan will create a foundation upon which to build our future food system. Once in place, the plan will provide a blueprint for municipalities, local foundations, organizations, businesses, and individuals. Adaptations can be requested and adopted over time to incorporate further ideas and the voices of future community leaders. If the recommendation to fund an ongoing food system coordinator is fulfilled, then the food system will have the communication, coordination, and support needed to facilitate ongoing growth and provide leadership during the next food access crisis.