



Families line up at AFAC headquarters on S. Nelson Street for free supplemental groceries.



Charles Meng, CEO of Arlington Food Assistance Center (AFAC) in front of new warehouse.

## How to Help Hungry People as Costs Rise

### Arlington Food Security Task Force: "The need persists."

BY SHIRLEY RUHE  
THE CONNECTION

**L**urking beneath the Arlington that ranks as one of the most preeminent places to live in the nation are the nearly 8 percent of households experiencing food insecurity. Arlington County just released a new report, "Improving Food Security and Access in Arlington, Virginia."

The report, prepared by the Arlington Food Security's Task Force of 28 stakeholders in partnership with the Urban Institute, found that Arlington County had many resources available for residents to meet their food needs, but the residents reported cost pressures in purchasing food and balancing household finances and bills. The

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report found 7.8 percent of Arlington households were experiencing food insecurity in 2019.

The study is part of the Food Security Task Force's strategic plan, which is expected to be released in the fall. The Arlington County Department of Human Services and the Arlington Food Assistance Center funded the report. The Committee has been meeting for the past 12 months to gather information, produce a needs assessment and come up with a strategic plan.

The report looked at geography of food distribution sites, hours of

are many organizations and individuals doing great work to close the gap, but the need persists."

The report found that there was substantial variability on food insecurity ranging from 2 percent to 15 percent of households in different parts of the County with the concentration in south and east Arlington County. The areas most affected include Glencarlyn, Buckingham/Ashton Heights, Pentagon City, Crystal City south, Forest Glen/Arlington Mill and Crystal City North neighborhoods.

In general, twenty percent of food insecure survey respondents said they could rarely afford food they found nutritious and healthy,

and fifteen percent said they could rarely find food that was culturally appropriate. The report found that Asian households with low incomes living in the Crystal City neighborhood had low access to charitable food and had to travel further to access charitable sites. This area of high-rise apartments had not been a primary target of food access interventions.

Stephanie Hopkins, Food Assis-

availability, transportation and accessibility of healthy and culturally

appropriate foods as well as experience of residents. It stated "There

**Report: "There are many organizations and individuals doing great work to close the gap, but the need persists."**

**Food insecurity ranges from 2 percent to 15 percent of households in different parts of Arlington.**



Volunteers pack vegetables contributed by local gardeners for low-income food programs.

tance Coordinator at the Department of Human Services, coordinated the report. She said this finding about Crystal City was the biggest surprise in the report for her. "I have to be honest. We had to do outreach and dig into the concentration." She said she thinks in this high-income area of Crystal City it may be more difficult for the food insecure families to come forward. "Stigma and pride may be a barrier, that they shouldn't have to take charity."

Sally Diaz-Wells, Social Justice and Outreach Ministry at Our Lady Queen of Peace Catholic Church, says the level of need in Crystal City also surprised her as well as the need for charitable services to be open nights and weekends when people can access them.

The report found that there are over 50 charitable food distribution sites in Arlington. Although most are open year round, fewer than 1 in 5 offered weekly service

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# How to Help Hungry People as Costs Rise

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or evening and weekend hours. Our Lady Queen of Peace operates a weekly food distribution that grew from 500 families a week to 700 last year.

Diaz-Wells says one of the most valuable parts for her of serving on the Committee was the information sharing. “Having contact with who is getting what, listening to the problems everyone has. It helps me adjust what OLQP does.” She explains, “We started buying more soy sauce. And Latino cultures don’t all like the same kind of dried beans so we offer choices.” Diaz-Wells said there used to be 80 percent Latinos but not anymore. There are Afghans and “I have seen more Asians in the last six months. When schools don’t have enough coverage for Easter week, we will have more.”

Robin Broder, Friends of Urban Agriculture and also a Committee member says, “It’s a little early to say how Friends of Urban Agriculture would fit in but I think that we need to think creatively to meet the needs of our residents who are food insecure. I think our demonstration garden Project HUG could be a model duplicated at other sites to help meet the needs of specific communities and grow culturally specific produce. Plot Against Hunger could partner with AFAC to provide produce for a mobile pantry as well.”

Charles Meng, CEO of AFAC, said nothing in the report surprised him. “This is the world I deal with. But there are 28 people on the committee and a number of them aren’t as familiar with the situation.” In addition, he thinks this finding is overblown. “A lot of these people in Crystal City are already coming to AFAC and the report is using data from 2019 before the pandemic.” He says that actually AFAC is already serving a higher percent of families in Crystal City than in other parts of the County.

The report also found that food insecurity is part of a bigger issue that resulted in difficulty paying expenses and with families having no backup to buffer in case of an emergency. Food budgets were often the first



**Sally Diaz-Wells, Our Lady Queen of Peace Social Justice and Outreach Ministry.**

to be cut as the families faced the challenge of balancing food and rent and utilities.

The report looked at the households’ access to SNAP, and charitable groceries or meals. They found that most residents had access to a SNAP retailer. They prioritized cost of groceries in deciding where to shop but encountered obstacles in finding healthy or culturally appropriate food; some struggled with trans-

portation. Diaz-Wells said that many of the people who come to their site at Our Lady Queen of Peace carpool with their cousins or neighbors or walk, and some ride bikes.

Meng says, “All of a sudden food insecurity is about transportation. But it’s really about why people can’t find food.” He says it’s a more structural issue, a symptom of something else — low wages, lack of affordable housing, high prices.”

Meng says, “We did a food insecurity report seven or eight years ago. We needed a new one.” AFAC and the Urban Institute funded the recent report. He said that Matt de Ferranti was the County Board chair at the time they funded this recent report and interested in this issue. “In fact, he is the only Board member who has been interest-

ed.” De Ferranti, who is currently the Board liaison to the Task Force, adds this is one of his top priorities and when COVID kicked in. “We needed to step up to keep people fed and prevent evictions.”

The report indicates that AFAC provided 57% of the total amount provided by food pantries and meals with schools providing 4 percent, Capital Area food bank 9 percent, senior 6 percent and other non-profits 9 percent. Meng said these numbers aren’t entirely accurate because they include double counting. For instance, someone may be coming to AFAC but

also getting food from the Capital Area food bank or another local distribution site.

Meng, sitting with a thick notebook of AFAC statistics on his desk, says, “I had really hoped we would get this kind of information from this report. But most of the sites don’t collect data in a way that is usable. They don’t collect addresses that would allow cross referencing.”



PHOTOS BY SHIRLEY RUHE/THE CONNECTION

**The line outside Our Lady Queen of Peace for their weekly food distribution.**

## What comes next?

The report recommendations cover transportation, food delivery and accessibility as well as communication and it would necessitate a number of different players to make them happen.

Meng says five or six of the recommendations involved AFAC, “and we have already addressed them midstream. We have expanded AFAC hours again to add evening hours.” He adds there is a new site at Arlington Mills Community Center, one of the areas identified in the report, and they are looking at another site at the West end of Columbia Pike. “We do offer culturally appropriate foods like halal meats and masa and a rotation of bean varieties,” and he pointed out, “We do it with our own dollars.”

“The AFAC budget is \$8 million a year and the county contributes only \$555,000.” Meng says that the establishment of AFAC as a supplemental provider of groceries for Arlington residents is extremely different the funding mechanisms used by most counties funding mechanisms. He explains two committed individuals and six congregations in 1988 founded the non-profit and “it wasn’t until 2005 that the County decided to give us a minor amount.”

Meng says the other recommendations are directed at the County and “my question

to them is do they have the funds or desire to make changes. I can decide what AFAC will do. I will make the appropriate changes at AFAC but I asked the County what they plan to do.”

Hopkins says the recommendations are scheduled to come out in the fall. The next step will be to set up focus groups in the summer and to ask the community what they think and then adjust the recommendations based on feedback. The recommendations will be based on what’s realistic, what makes sense.

Hopkins says the strategies proposed in the plan will build on the report’s recommendations, including implementing a coordinated SNAP outreach plan and making charitable food resources and government food assistance programs more accessible to residents. “Implementation of those strategies will be shared between Arlington County, AFAC, APS and other organizations and will be directed by Arlington’s Food Security Coordinator.”

Hopkins says some of the Urban Institute recommendations are not as realistic for Arlington. There are a lot of recommendations and it won’t all happen at once. Hopkins says, “We’ve got to be realistic. Every inch we get closer to helping, that’s great. Every little piece helps.”

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**Food insecurity is part of difficulty paying expenses. Food budgets were often the first to be cut.**