

## COMMENTARY ON COVID-19 AND THE FOOD SYSTEM

# Case study of a food relief grocery model: The Neighborhood Pop-Up Grocery Project

**JAFSCD  
Responds to  
the COVID-19  
Pandemic**



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### Abstract

In Austin, Texas, Sustainable Food Center, in partnership with Foodshed Investors and the city of Austin, responded to the COVID-19 crisis with a mini-grocery pilot project. The Neighborhood Pop-Up Grocery Pilot Project engaged local restaurants to serve as points of access for fresh and affordable food. This model served as both a food-access and supply-chain solution, utilizing partnerships with local farmers and distributors to source food for Austin communities and restaurant partners in order to

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provide the food at an affordable price point. This case study outlines the novel model and describes three key takeaways from this 2020 pilot project.

## Keywords

Food Relief, Local Food Movement, COVID-19, Pandemic, Food Distribution

## Introduction

In Austin, Texas, Sustainable Food Center, in partnership with Foodshed Investors and the city of Austin, responded to the COVID-19 crisis with a minigrocery pilot project. The Neighborhood Pop-Up Grocery Pilot Project (“Grocery Project”) engaged local restaurants to serve as points of access for fresh and affordable food, allowing families to travel less distance than to full-service grocery stores and also to reduce COVID-19 exposure to others in high-traffic, full-service grocery outlets, while bringing additional sales outlets to local restaurants and farms. This pilot project operated from March 2020 to September 2020; impact metrics are shown in Table 1.

### Overall Impact Metrics of the Grocery Project

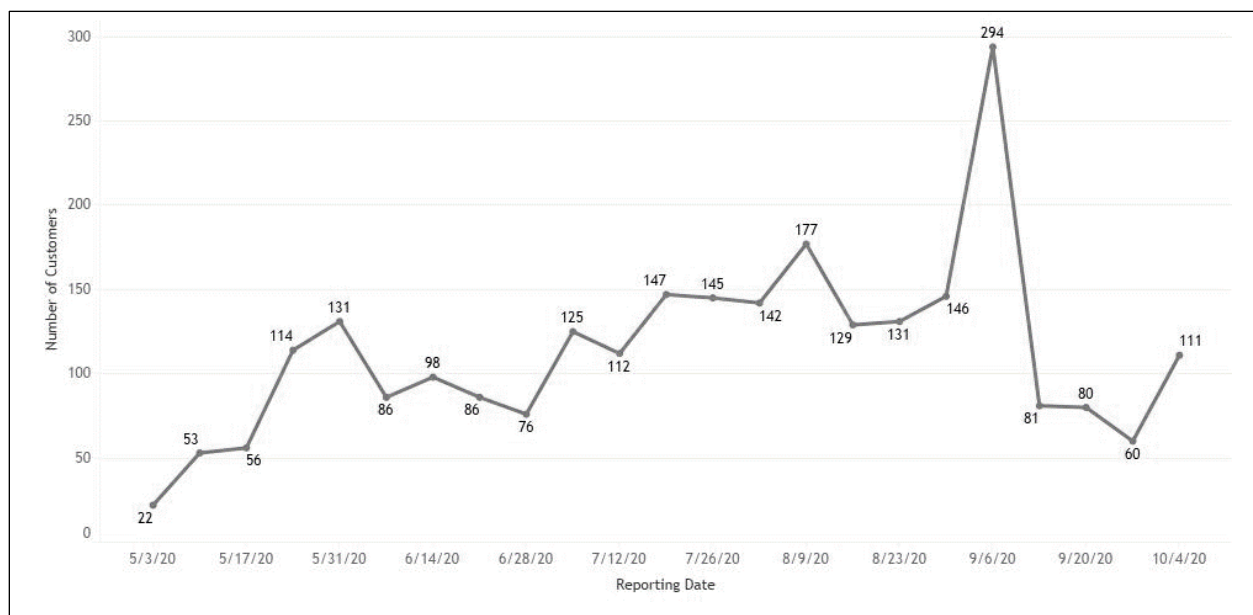
Metric	Unit
Amount spent on procuring local food (US\$)	\$84,970.77
Amount of revenue generated for local restaurants (US\$)	\$34,744
Total number of customers served	2,597

## The Model

The Grocery Project sourced local food and donated it to locally owned restaurants, which then offered it for sale below the market price to their customer base. This project was focused exclusively on raw grocery items; prepared meals and food items were not part of the program.

The Grocery Project served as both a *food-access* and *supply-chain* solution, utilizing partnerships with local farmers and distributors to source local food for Austin communities and restaurant partners in order to provide the food to their communities at an affordable price point. Local restaurants were selected as partners in the project based on the under-utilization of restaurant space and labor in the first

### Customers Served by Week by the Neighborhood Pop-Up Grocery Project





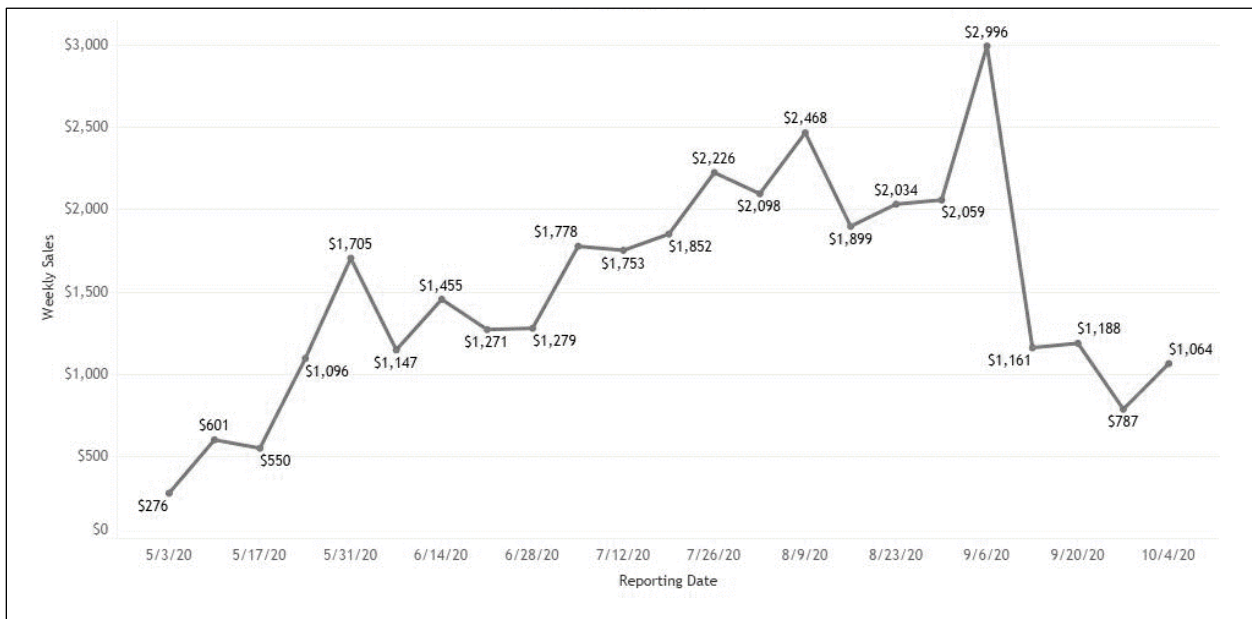
**Boxes sit in a van beside The Common Market's delivery truck, waiting to be distributed to Austin restaurants, courtesy of Sustainable Food Center.**

few months of the pandemic, and on their ability to target specific neighborhoods where they held community trust and an established customer base. This pilot project needed to meet the fast pace of the pandemic on a limited budget, so leveraging existing connections between customers and restaurants allowed for implementation across the city with minimal marketing. Furthermore, as food access was the primary focus of this project, engaging restaurants enabled the Grocery Project to serve areas with limited or no access to full-service grocery options.

Restaurants were supplied weekly with locally sourced mixed produce boxes, which were supplied by the Houston-based food hub The Common Market. Most restaurants also opted into additional grocery products, such as local eggs, yogurt, and pantry staples, which were supplied either directly by local farms or the Austin-based food hubs Farmhouse Delivery and Farm to Table Texas.

The project was funded by a US\$112,000 allocation from the Austin City Council emergency COVID-19 aid fund. For the purchase of produce and other staple food items, 75.5% of the funding went directly to farmers or food hubs; 24.4% went to advertising the pop-up grocery locations, PPE, delivery costs, and needed supplies; and less than 1% went to an intern supporting the project.

**Neighborhood Pop-Up Grocery Project's Restaurant Partner Sales by Week**





## Key Takeaways

The Neighborhood Pop-Up Grocery Project (Grocery Project) was initiated in response to the COVID-19 crisis to backfill necessary food access services and support two crucial economic sectors: agriculture and local restaurant businesses. As the COVID-19 crisis continues and further social and economic damage mounts, projects such as the Grocery Project and other crisis relief efforts are critical components of the food access emergency response across the United States. The project team has identified three key takeaways from the project's six-month pilot operation.

### 1. Building relationships and trust takes time. Our work with local restaurant business owners has been a huge asset with immense potential and deep value to future food access work.

The project team has laid the groundwork with local restaurant business owners by building trust and cooperation among Austin's social good sector and its food business owners, an effort critical to its success. As most had never before worked on food access initiatives, local food business owners were scrambling to continue to serve their customers in the ways that mattered most to them. While the concept of the Grocery Project piqued partners' interest, much groundwork was necessary to shape a food access solution that also held beneficial outcomes for the restaurants themselves.

In six months, the project team successfully developed and nurtured relationships with Austin business owners to open pop-up grocery sales inside their restaurants. Critical to this success was the time spent articulating the needs and goals of the restaurants and the value they bring to food relief efforts in their own neighborhoods. In this time of crisis, collaboration between public and private sectors is crucial, and relationships are a major asset in addressing the unprecedented food access challenges to come.



**Out of the sun, a towering pallet of farm-fresh veggie boxes awaits distribution, courtesy of Sustainable Food Center.**



**A delivery person sets up farm-fresh veggie boxes in a local restaurant, to be sold later that day, courtesy of Sustainable Food Center.**



**A delivery driver hands restaurant staff farm-fresh veggie boxes, courtesy of Sustainable Food Center.**

**2. This project is providing value to local businesses and consumers but relies exclusively on government subsidy.**

The Grocery Project provides restaurant partners with free, farm-fresh food to help boost their businesses and feed consumers, and is subsidized by a government contract. While this model fills a critical gap right now, continued support beyond this stop-gap measure—for this and other programs investing in good, local food—will help ensure long-term vitality of our food system.

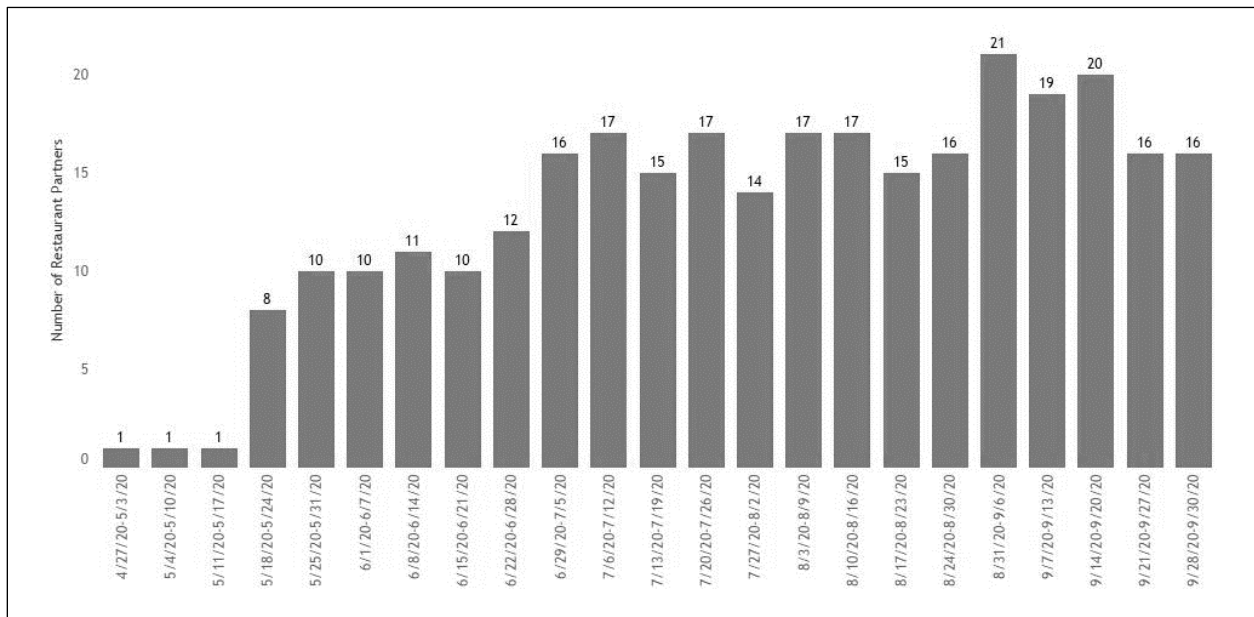
The federal government currently spends billions of dollars on food subsidies, both for commodity farmers and for grocery shoppers at and below the poverty line.

This project touches both ends of the supply chain, and by supporting local food it also cultivates the kind of secondary services that local food and farmers provide: local economic activity, care for local ecosystems, and protection of the safety of those producing and consuming the food products. If we want to build a more just, equitable, and resilient food system, we must invest public dollars in innovative models, like the one described in this case study.

**3. Building new, localized supply-chain pathways is vital to building a more resilient food system.**

The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare the deep and fundamental flaws in our food system and supply chains, underscoring the urgent need to remake regional food systems. We must invest resources in

**Neighborhood Pop-Up Grocery Project’s Restaurant Partners Over Time**



concentrating on economic justice, food access, and long-term resiliency. The Grocery Project converges around local food, local farmers, and the communities they serve. By building connections between farmers and local restaurants, this project forges new supply channels that keep dollars local, allows for community-level solutions, and ensures good and fair labor practices. In addition, this works to shorten supply chains by reducing intermediaries, in the long term protecting them from and allowing them to recover from disruptions more easily. Local food, local businesses, and local control means a more resilient system. It means a system that protects consumers, local economies, and our food future.

Questions on this case study? Email [info@sustainablefoodcenter.org](mailto:info@sustainablefoodcenter.org).

