



GROCERY DELIVERY BEST PRACTICES DURING COVID-19



This guide was produced for the Detroit Food Academy, a culinary arts and entrepreneurship training program, to help the organization shift to remote operations in fall 2020. However, the following best practices were consolidated from a variety of food delivery programs across Southeast Michigan and should be applicable to other contexts. Specifically, program managers from the following organizations were interviewed: Ann Arbor Meals on Wheels, Central Detroit Christian Community Development, Downtown Boxing Gym Detroit Youth Program, Food Gatherers, Jewish Family Services of Washtenaw County, Washtenaw County Senior Nutrition Program, and YMCA of Metropolitan Detroit.

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PLANNING THE PROGRAM

Delivery cycle planning

Think about all of the stages of the program cycle: client orders/requests → food acquisition → packaging → route planning → delivery → confirmation/feedback → repeat.

- When will each of the stages take place? Will there be multiple cycles running at one time for different groups of clients?
- Create a shared calendar that maps out when each stage will take place, by cohort if necessary, so that staff are on the same page about what needs to happen when.
- If clients need their food delivered by a particular day, plan to deliver at least one day prior.
- Stagger deliveries as much as possible, so that they are evenly spread into shorter routes rather than crowded into one day or week.

Recordkeeping

Keeping all client information - including addresses, phone numbers & other contact information, dietary restrictions, and delivery notes - in one central database is essential for successful deliveries and staff communication.

- Prioritize data quality. A transposed address or missing phone number can cause major delivery delays. Make sure any clients that are on a route have at least one phone number and an address that has been double-checked for completeness and accuracy.
- Collect program data that will be helpful for reporting later, such as food delivered and clients served.
- If possible, link your client intake form directly to your database (example: a Google Form that feeds into a master Google Sheet).
- If possible, choose a widely-used database like Salesforce that can easily integrate with other programs (like a route planning application), and/or easily export data in an accessible format (like Excel/CSV).

Database examples: Google Sheets, ServTracker, Salesforce, Link2Feed, Microsoft Access



Food acquisition

Generally, bulk/wholesale purchasing is more cost-effective than retail purchasing, even for small programs. Different vendors are appropriate for different orders:

- Costco/Sam's Club for smaller bulk quantities (5-10 lb containers)
- Gordon Food Service for medium bulk quantities (10-25 lb containers)
- Atlas Wholesale Foods for large bulk quantities (25+ lb containers)
- Eastern Market and LaGrasso Bros. are additional options for bulk produce
- Gleaners Food Bank is a potential source, though the food they have available each week varies

Bulk purchasing tips

- Stock up on shelf-stable pantry items as your storage space allows. Root vegetables also keep well.
- Taste-test items that you would not normally think of buying in shelf-stable versions, like milk. Moving items into the shelf-stable category reduces your food safety risk.
- Order as far ahead as possible; wholesalers are affected by COVID-related supply chain interruptions and delivery delays.
- Nuts and pork are common dietary restrictions, so you may want to avoid products that contain them.
- If you are including cleaning products in your delivery packages, ask your clients what they need so that you can focus on the most popular/high-need items.

Food packaging

The primary concern with grocery deliveries is keeping cold food cold. Packaging strategies can ensure that food stays at safe temperatures and make deliveries more efficient.

- As mentioned above, if you have access to them, refrigerated vehicles are ideal for transporting cold food.
- Depending on the size of the food packages you are delivering, coolers, cooler/insulated bags, and boxes are good options for storing food in a vehicle. All of them can be filled with ice or ice packs to extend the amount of time they can keep food cold (41 degrees Fahrenheit or less; ideally between 36-41 degrees).
- If possible, set your refrigerator to 34 degrees Fahrenheit to keep food a little extra cold before it goes out for delivery.
- Raw meat should always be frozen before it goes out for delivery.
- Consider purchasing half-gallon or smaller containers of dairy rather than full gallons, which are harder to keep cold.
- If possible, put everything that has to be delivered to one client in one container. Depending on the amount being delivered, large heavy-duty plastic grocery bags with flat bottoms or recycled boxes are good container options.
- If there is more than one standard bag/box being delivered, make differentiations between delivery packages very clear - for example, with large color-coded labels.
- Put any non-refrigerated/non-frozen items in delivery packages a day or more in advance of the delivery day, then add cold items to packages just before loading them into the vehicle.
- Load packages into the vehicle in reverse order - end of the route first, beginning of the route last - to make accessing the packages in the order of delivery as easy as possible.
- Double and triple check that the driver has exactly what they need to deliver the correct packages on their route.

“ **The primary concern with grocery deliveries is keeping cold food cold.** ”

Food acquisition

Planning delivery routes that are efficient and manageable is a challenge. Keeping in mind some basic guidelines, and using technology for optimization, can make route planning easier.

- Keep routes to 2-3 hours if possible. Shorter routes help with driver fatigue as well as food safety and vehicle storage capacity.
- A good rule of thumb is that one driver can deliver to 5-7 homes/locations per hour.
- Sorting addresses by zip code can be an easy way to create clusters of addresses that are close enough to each other to make a good route.
- Encourage your driver to use the navigation system that works best for them. If they have a smartphone or GPS device they are comfortable with, they can use it; if they prefer paper maps with turn-by-turn directions, provide those for each route.

Route mapping and optimization

- There are a range of route mapping and optimization applications available, from the simple and free (*Google Maps, MapQuest, Bringfood, RouteXL*) to the sophisticated and costly (*Route4Me, Badger Maps, ServTracker, Salesforce Maps*).
- *Some key features to consider when choosing an application:*
 - *Can you save routes and edit them later?*
 - *Does it optimize routes based on time and/or distance?*
 - *Can you modify the optimized route?*
 - *Does it have a mobile app that your driver can use while delivering?*
 - *Can your driver take notes and/or track successful deliveries in the mobile app?*
 - *Does it have reporting capability?*
 - *Does it integrate with your database?*
 - *Is it user-friendly for your staff and driver?*

SAFE AND EFFECTIVE DELIVERIES

COVID safety

The basic COVID precautions that have become familiar - masks, hand washing/sanitizer, and social distancing - apply to all aspects of preparing and delivering food to clients.

- Staff or volunteers who are compiling food into delivery packages and/or delivering food should wear masks at all times, wash hands and/or use hand sanitizer frequently, and touch food as little as possible.
- Washing hands and using hand sanitizer frequently is preferred over wearing gloves, since gloves can still transmit germs and wearing them sometimes creates a false sense of cleanliness.
- Consider asking clients who are able to pick up their grocery packages to do so. This reduces delivery logistics and allows prioritization of those who are not able to pick up their food. See [Feeding America's Low-Contact Distribution Playbook](#) for pick-up models.
- Require staff and volunteers to complete a common COVID symptom survey and temperature check before each shift, and send anyone with symptoms or a fever home.
- Stagger start times for staff and volunteer shifts to enable social distancing.
- Limit shared equipment, even pens. Use single-use disposable items whenever possible. Sanitize any shared equipment (clipboards, coolers, door handles, etc.) after each use.
- Staff/volunteers should be conscious of touch points and potential cross-contamination when delivering. For example, a deliverer should get out of their vehicle and open all necessary vehicle doors, then sanitize their hands, then pick up the package they are delivering. After returning to their vehicle, they should sanitize their hands again, especially if they touched a client's door.
- In general, at each door a deliverer should knock, set down the food package, then step back 6 feet to wait for acknowledgement - either the client waving from inside or opening the door. For food safety and COVID safety, it is helpful if the client has a table, chair, or other surface where food can be placed other than on the ground.

See [FEMA COVID-19 Food Bank Best Practices](#) for additional COVID safety and potential best practice ideas from food banks across the country.



Food safety

Following a few simple guidelines can ensure that food is safe to eat when it reaches the client.

- Keep cold food below 41 degrees Fahrenheit to prevent bacteria growth. See [Food Temperatures - Danger Zone](#) for more information.
- Have the driver/deliverer use an infrared thermometer to check that cold food is at or below 41 degrees before delivering a package. Make it clear that out-of-temperature food cannot be delivered, and should be returned to the distribution site.
- One of the most impactful strategies for keeping food cold is making sure delivery routes are relatively short - ideally 2-3 hours, but no more than 4 hours. See [Time as a Public Health Control](#) for more information. (Note: since grocery deliveries are not likely to be immediately consumed after delivery, delivery routes should be kept on the shorter side of the time guidelines.)
- Make sure drivers/deliverers know that they cannot leave food at a client's door unless they visually confirm that the client is home to receive the delivery. Food left outside for too long can rise to dangerous temperatures or attract pests.
- As mentioned above, it is ideal if the client has a table, chair, or other surface where food can be placed other than on the ground.

For more detailed information about food safety concerns, refer to [Wayne/Washtenaw County](#) and [State of Michigan](#) food safety guidelines, which are based on the FDA's Food Code. The MSU Extension also offers [ServSafe](#) food safety training.

Communication

As with any program, clear and frequent communication helps things run smoothly. Recommendations for client communication:

- Set clear expectations in advance.
 - Be up-front that deliveries must be contactless for everyone's safety. That means staff/volunteers will not enter clients' buildings or homes, and clients must be ready to receive deliveries when they arrive.
 - Give clients a delivery window when they can expect their delivery - anywhere from 30 minutes to 3 hours, depending on the variability of your routes. Let the client know well in advance if their delivery window changes.
 - Make it clear to clients that if they are unavailable to receive a delivery during their delivery window times, they will no longer be eligible for deliveries.
- Reliability communicates respect and care. If you cannot meet a prior delivery window commitment, adjust expectations accordingly.
- Send delivery reminders at least the day before delivery, via text or the client's preferred contact method.
- Have drivers/deliverers call or text the client when they are on their way from the previous stop so that clients can be ready.
- Provide ways for clients to provide feedback in order to maintain an open and honest two-way dialogue. Adapt to feedback when something is not working.
- Consider including donated or purchased non-essential items (e.g.... cloth masks, activity booklets, plants, flowers, cards) in delivery packages to show clients extra care.

Staff communication

- Make sure that all staff, and volunteers as appropriate, have access to the shared calendar that shows the different stages of the delivery cycle so that everyone is on the same page.
- Make it clear to drivers/deliverers which staff person they should contact if they have issues or questions during their route, particularly if they are unable to complete a delivery.
- Hold weekly team meetings with everyone involved in the delivery process to surface any issues.

APPENDIX

COVID safety

[Feeding America's Low-No Contact Distribution Playbook](#)

[FEMA COVID-19 Food Bank Best Practices](#)

Food safety

[Food Temperatures - Danger Zone](#)

[Time as a Public Health Control](#)

[Michigan Modified Food Code](#)

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University of Michigan Youth Policy Lab
5201 Institute for Social Research
426 Thompson St
Ann Arbor, MI 48104

734-647-8829
@YouthPolicyLab
youthpolicylab.umich.edu

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About the Author

Lindsey Dowswell is a dual degree student in public policy and urban planning. Her focus is on suburban equity issues, including education, housing segregation, and transportation.

Youth Policy Lab Mission

The University of Michigan Youth Policy Lab helps community and government agencies make better decisions by measuring what really works. We're data experts who believe that government can and must do better for the people of Michigan. We're also parents and community members who dream of a brighter future for all of our children. At the Youth Policy Lab, we're working to make that dream a reality by strengthening programs that address some of our most pressing social challenges.

We recognize that the wellbeing of youth is intricately linked to the wellbeing of families and communities, so we engage in work that impacts all age ranges. Using rigorous evaluation design and data analysis, we're working closely with our partners to build a future where public investments are based on strong evidence, so all Michiganders have a pathway to prosperity.