



Chatham FOOD HUB

Food Access and Economic Opportunity in a Pandemic

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Presenters



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UNC Rural Health COVID-19 Rapid Response Grant - Chatham Food Hub

Objective: Design and implement an innovative, sustainable food hub model that combines successful elements of models elsewhere in NC with unique entrepreneurial innovations.

- ▶ Stimulate and coordinate food system (restaurant and farm) purchasing and donations
- ▶ Help food supply/distribution systems adapt to COVID-19
- ▶ Provide free meals for people in need



Getting Started

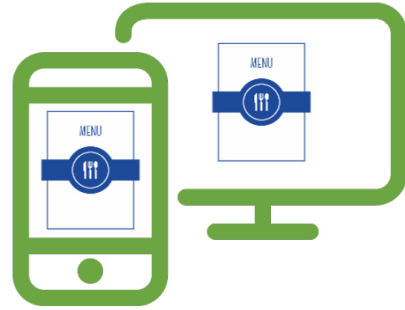
- ▶ Outbreak of COVID-19 in March 2020 prompted concerns re: food system sustainability, food insecurity
- ▶ In late March, Wertman emailed Ammerman re: a project to connect UNC Hospitals employees with produce
- ▶ Discussion soon pivoted to more direct community response to COVID-driven food insecurity
 - ▶ Interested in model to sustain local businesses/jobs AND help feed people
 - ▶ Interested in implementing something in a nearby county, less affluent than Durham/Orange/Wake
- ▶ Intervention idea: Establish “food hub” similar to existing Carrboro United model, but based in a more rural and less affluent area
 - ▶ Chatham County emerged as initial focus area due to UNC Health presence there, existing partnerships with community orgs, rurality, and relative proximity to Triangle area



The Food Hub Model



Businesses add meals and farm-fresh produce to the weekly Hub menu.



Customers order Hub items online.



Businesses prepare and bring orders to pickup site once weekly.



Customers drive or walk through pickup site. Employees hand out orders.



Customers enjoy local food, and businesses enjoy more sales!

Chatham County vs. Siler City Demographics

Overall, Siler City is younger, poorer, and less White than Chatham County as a whole¹⁻²

- ▶ Chatham County median income is \$66,857, but Siler City median income is <\$35,000¹
- ▶ Siler City has significantly larger Black and Hispanic populations than Chatham County overall^{1,2}

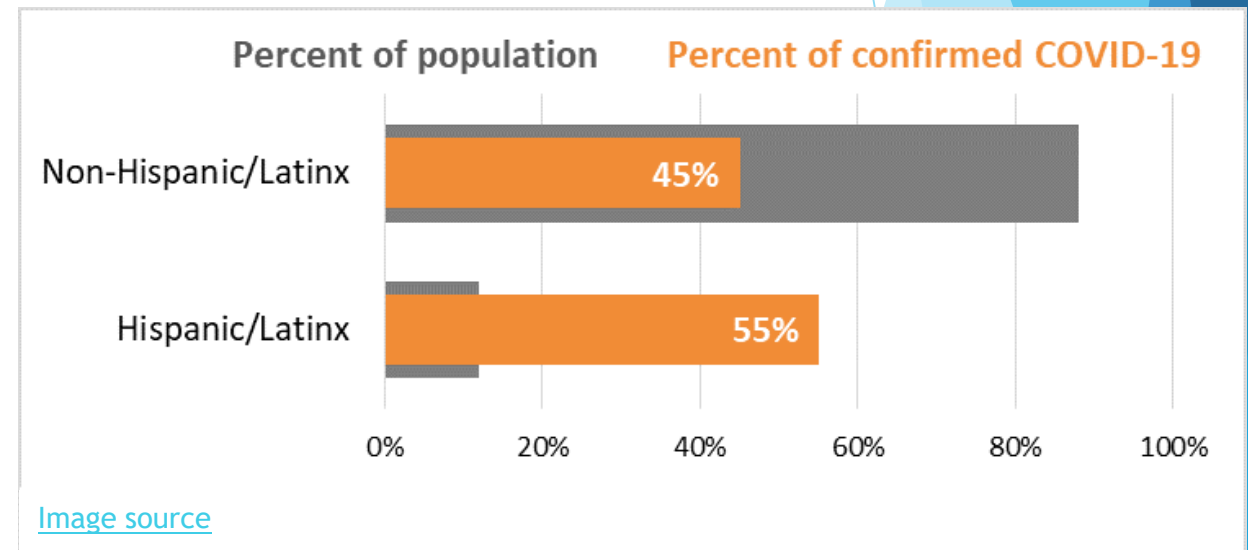
Racial/Ethnic Group	% of Chatham County Pop. ²	% of Greater Siler City Pop. ³
Black	12.7%	24.7%
Hispanic	12.5%	42.8%
White	82.2%	58.4%
Total Population	71,472	10,785

Health Equity and COVID-19 in Chatham County & Siler City

- ▶ Compared to non-Hispanic White residents, Black and Hispanic Chatham residents:¹⁻²
 - ▶ Experience more poverty
 - ▶ Have higher rates of chronic illness (e.g. diabetes, heart disease)
 - ▶ Live shorter lives
- ▶ Hispanic people are ~12% of Chatham pop. but more than half of county COVID cases¹
- ▶ Siler City had second-highest per capita COVID-19 rate in NC by early May⁴
 - ▶ Meatpacking outbreaks a major driver of case volume, esp. among Hispanic residents
 - ▶ As of Oct. 8, rate was 14th-highest in the state and the highest in the Triangle

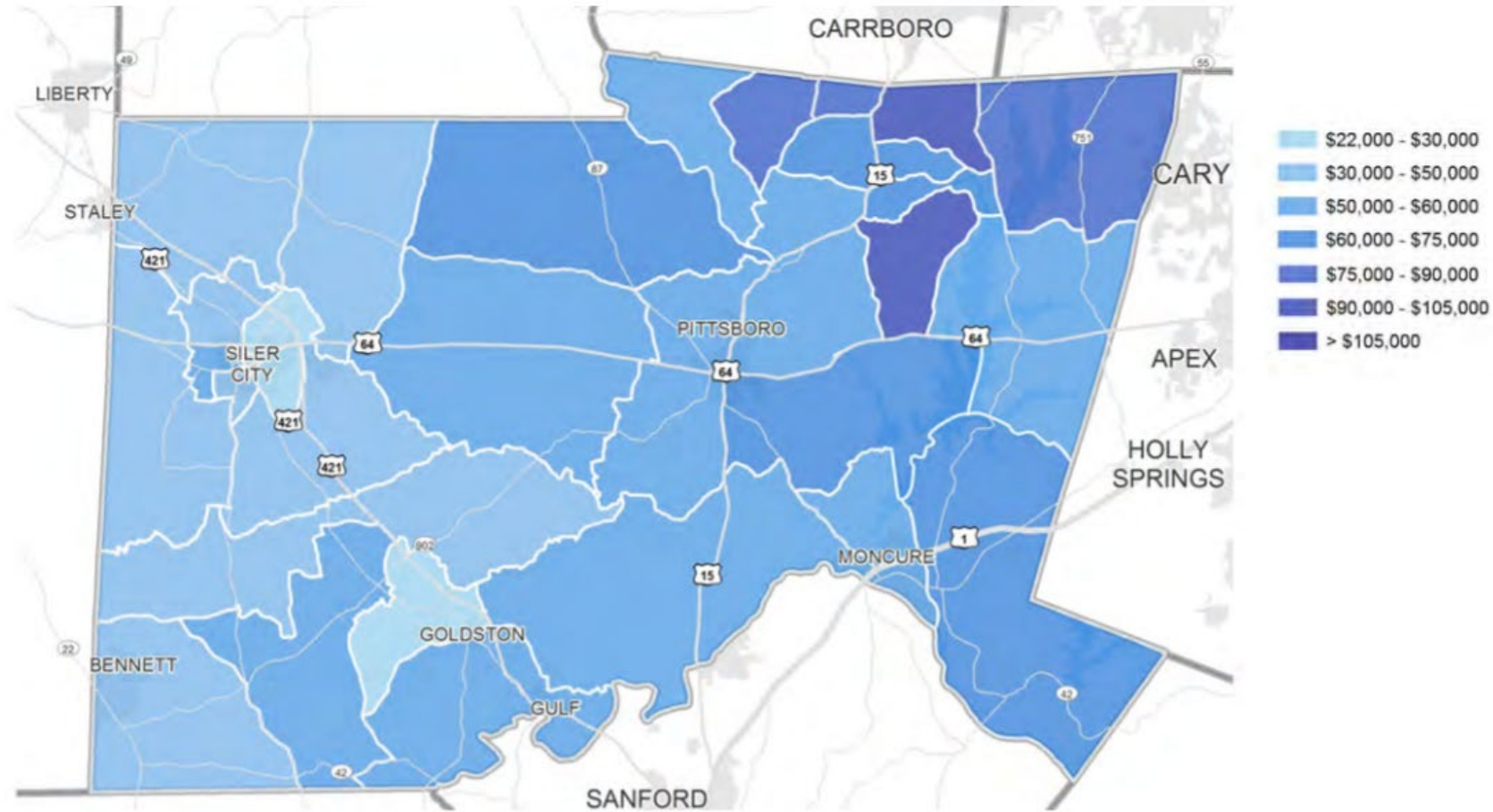
Race/Ethnicity	Percent in Poverty	Infant Mortality Rate (per 1,000)	Life Expectancy (In Years)
White	11.6%	9.8	83.8
African-American	22.6%	26.7	78
Hispanic/Latinx	32.2%	22.6	Not Available

[Image source](#)

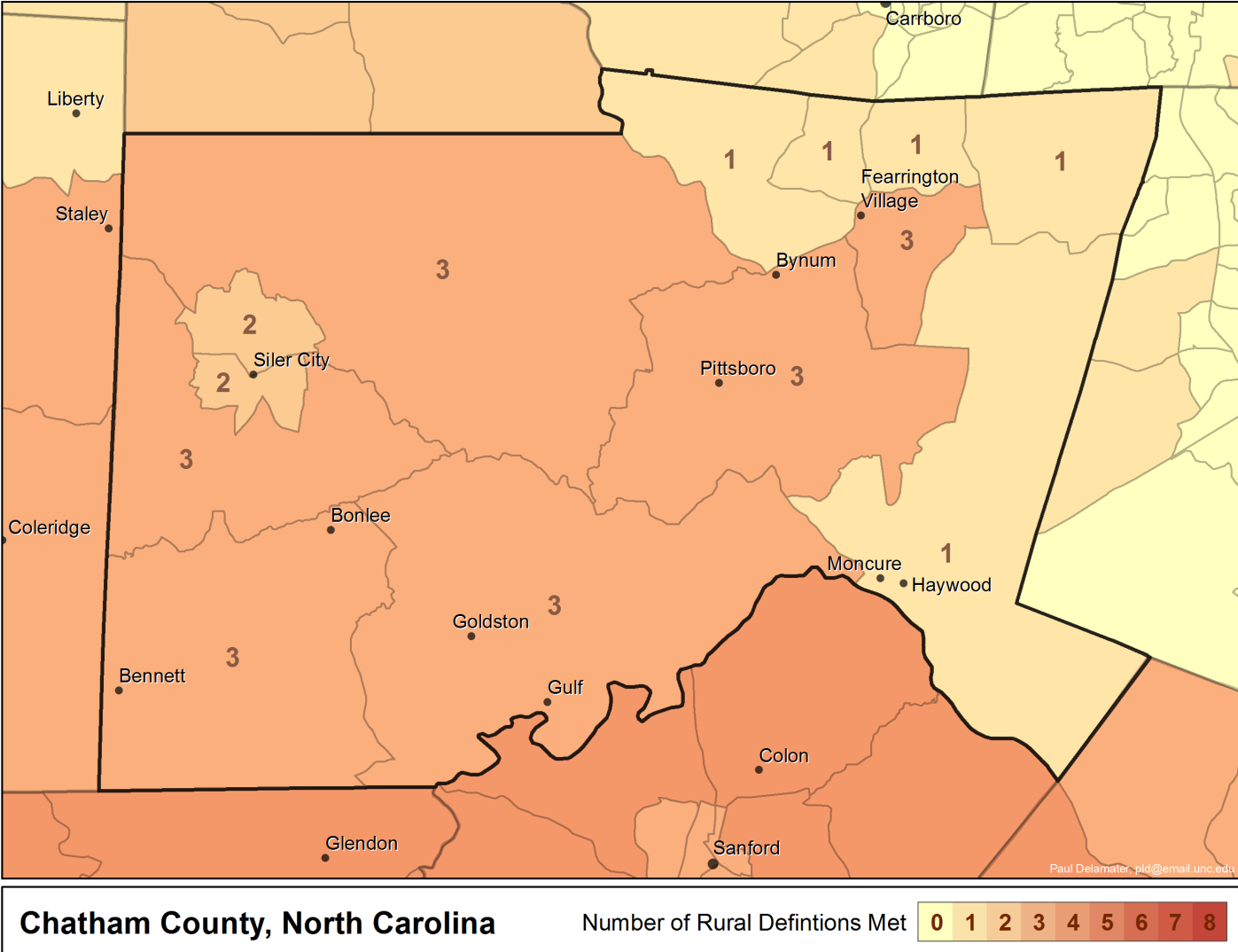


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Median Income in Chatham County⁵

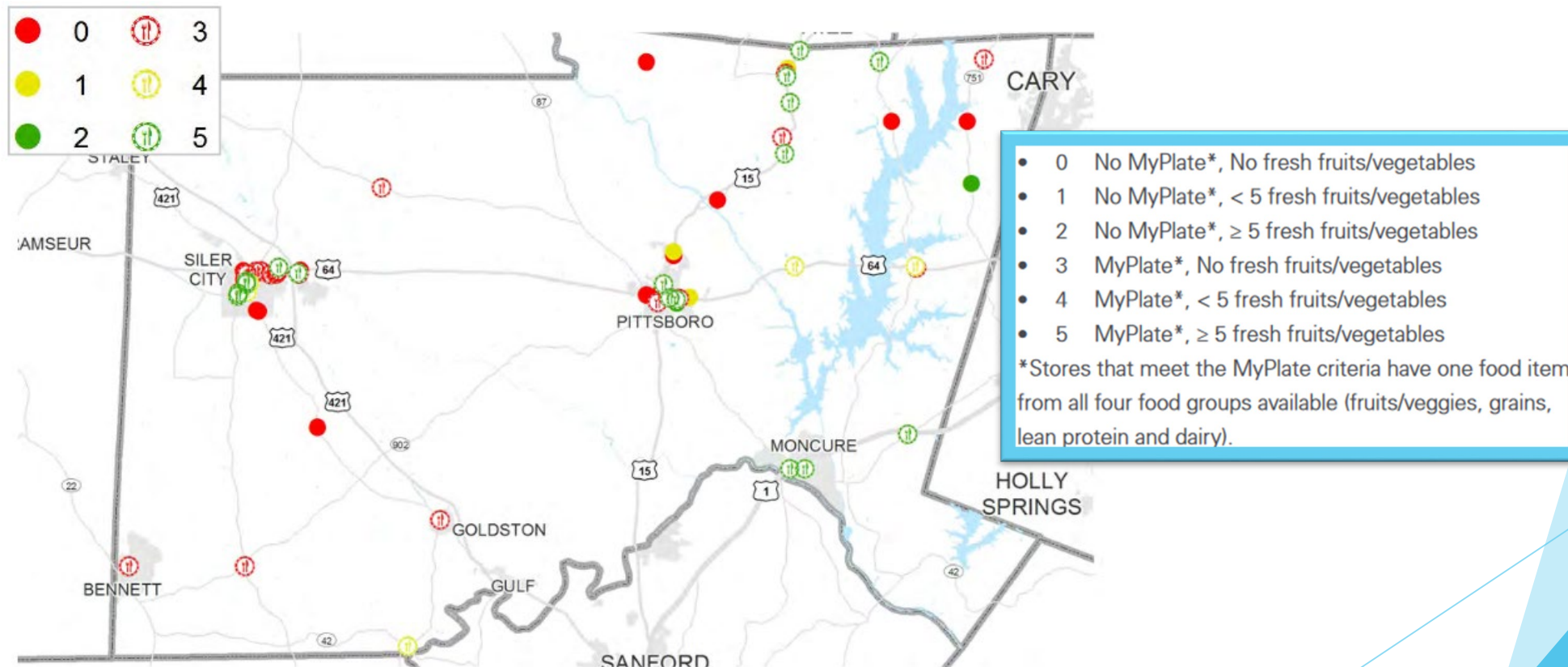


Rurality in Chatham County



Graphic courtesy of Dr. Paul Delamater

Healthy Food Access in Chatham County & Siler City⁵



[Image source](#)

Assembling the Team

- ▶ April 20, 2020: Kickoff meeting with ~40 community partners from across Chatham County to solicit input on Hub idea
 - ▶ Representation from local government, local food banks, nonprofits
 - ▶ Key questions: Additional partners to engage, potential pitfalls, overall feasibility and desirability of Hub concept, ideal Hub location
 - ▶ “Stone Soup” exercise identified significant assets among partners—personal networks, expertise, knowledge of community
- ▶ May 2020: Operational workgroups formed with community partners to drive planning: Community Engagement, Funding & Logistics, Safety & Compliance
 - ▶ Groups met biweekly via webinar
 - ▶ Two community partners, Hilary Pollan from County Manager’s Office and Tara Gregory from Chatham Public Health Department, signed on as project co-leads



Engaging Students

- ▶ District 7 UNC undergrad team & Kenan-Flagler Business School MBA team assisted with market research and recommendations for vendor selection and sustainability
- ▶ Nutrition students helped with development of customer interview guide and conducted interviews with customers onsite
- ▶ UNC law students assisted with nonprofit incorporation application
- ▶ All students (except law students) participated in “Welcome to Chatham County” orientation led by community partners
- ▶ Students also helped make connections to their communities—one student helped recruit a Hub Coordinator, while another involved her church in supporting the Hub

Tailoring the Hub to Siler City

- ▶ Language access
- ▶ Sensitivity to privacy protections/attitudes re: law enforcement
- ▶ Hub location
- ▶ Affordability
- ▶ Challenges & limitations
 - ▶ Cash payments
 - ▶ Phone orders
 - ▶ SNAP/EBT



Engaging Vendors

- ▶ Initial vendor choices driven by community workgroup input, District 7 team research on local food options & pricing
- ▶ Aimed to engage a range of vendors, with a focus on engaging women and minority business owners given race and gender discrepancies in federal aid allocation⁶⁻⁷
- ▶ Barriers: Limited staffing availability, timing for farmers (growing season), inability to meet in person
- ▶ Ultimately engaged 10 total vendors over 11 weeks of Hub sales:
 - ▶ 5 restaurants (two women-owned; two owned by Hispanic people)
 - ▶ 4 farms (three women-owned; one owned by a Black woman veteran)
 - ▶ CORA Food Pantry



Launching the Hub

- ▶ Formalized business infrastructure—nonprofit incorporation, employee recruitment and hiring, online ordering system, banking
- ▶ Confirmed location, secured required permits, and arranged onsite refrigerated storage
- ▶ Confirmed vendor participation via signed agreements (with help from *pro bono* law firm)
- ▶ Finalized logo materials, website, Facebook page and publicized via local media and blog posts from partners
- ▶ First distribution day: August 5th, 2020





Customer Engagement

- ▶ CORA emergency food box was major draw for lower-income consumers
- ▶ Divided customer base: Customers receiving free CORA boxes (less consistent base but far more individuals) vs. customers paying for food
- ▶ Pay-it-forward donations ultimately became mechanism for increasing paid orders
 - ▶ Individual consumers & churches donated money through online ordering platform, checks, and UNC Health Foundation donations
 - ▶ Food Hub team used donations to purchase items directly from vendors
 - ▶ Tara Gregory worked with nonprofit partners to match purchased meals up with recipients; recipients picked up meals directly or received meal delivery from local pastor/nonprofit contact

Customer Feedback

- ▶ Students were unable to successfully contact and interview Siler City residents by phone but administered onsite customer survey at order distribution instead
- ▶ Customers surveyed at order distribution indicated Hub's **convenience**, **COVID-safety precautions**, and **support for small businesses** were the main factors driving their business
- ▶ All six customers surveyed agreed they would definitely recommend the Hub to someone else
- ▶ Outside of survey, other customers expressed interest in second Hub location closer to higher-income area in Chatham, e.g. Pittsboro or Governor's Club

“It's a great resource **for food-insecure people and those who can pay. True community.**”
- Wilma Schroeder

“It's **convenient**, I like the idea of getting food from restaurants in Pittsboro.”
- Marcia Grimes

Chatham Food Hub Outcomes

- ▶ Generated **\$8,481.79 in revenue** (\$7,945.47 in sales & tips; \$536.32 in tax)
- ▶ Paid over **\$7,000 in wages** to Chatham County residents
- ▶ Donated **862 servings of prepared food** to food-insecure Chatham County residents via community partners
- ▶ Distributed **220 emergency food boxes** to 100 unique individuals
- ▶ Distributed over **300 cloth face coverings** to Hub customers
- ▶ Hosted the [Chatham Health Alliance Resource Hub](#) **team five times** to provide COVID testing info, PPE, med disposal kits and lockboxes, and other free supplies
- ▶ Intangibles: Doubled social media following for new farmer vendor; restaurant vendor booked a catering gig from Hub customer; another restaurant vendor is now partnering with Ammerman on separate Good Bowls project

“Thank you all of you, for your time dedicated to help us, all small business. We have a great gratitude for your support.” - Leo Davalos, Rojo Canela

Lessons Learned from Pandemic-Era Planning

- ▶ Identify and leverage local leaders, resources, and infrastructure
 - ▶ Chatham Health Alliance hosted Food Hub site on their existing webpage
 - ▶ Local nonprofit agreed to “host” Hub Coordinator on their payroll
 - ▶ NC Cooperative Extension and Health Dept. used existing meetings to recruit vendors
 - ▶ Health Dept. provided PPE and other supplies
- ▶ Find and engage local government champions to help with rules, regulations, and red tape
- ▶ Work with businesses! Chamber of Commerce and Visitors Bureau contacts were **critical** for publicity and restaurant vendor recruitment
- ▶ Don’t underestimate how much people WANT ways to help during a time of crisis
- ▶ COVID/crisis fatigue is REAL, and constant reinforcement is needed



Future Considerations for Sustainable Food Hubs

- ▶ Diversify customer base by offering Hub in multiple locations
 - ▶ Build in surcharges for wealthier customers willing to pay for convenience
 - ▶ Subsidize purchases for customers in lower-income areas
- ▶ Provide financial incentives to early-adopter vendors
- ▶ Build in additional value-adds for participating vendors, e.g. some food hubs assist farmers with produce storage in between sales days
- ▶ Charge vendors a participation fee upon reaching a certain sales volume (i.e. percentage of sales or flat rate to participate)
- ▶ Don't underestimate need for paper-based marketing, especially in areas with less internet access

Acknowledgments

Thank you to the **MANY** Chatham County partners who made the Food Hub possible, especially...

- ▶ Chatham County Chamber of Commerce
- ▶ Chatham County Department of Public Health
- ▶ Chatham County Manager's Office
- ▶ Chatham Trades
- ▶ CORA Food Pantry
- ▶ NC Cooperative Extension Center
- ▶ Pittsboro-Siler City Convention & Visitors Bureau
- ▶ Town of Siler City Parks & Recreation

Additional thanks to UNC Rural and the UNC Health Foundation for funding support and to Jamey Lowdermilk of Brooks Pierce for her *pro bono* legal help!



Questions?



Appendix

References & Project Timeline

References

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Launching the Food Hub: A High-Level Timeline

- ▶ April: Submitted initial funding application (Gillings Global Innovation Lab); hosted partner kickoff meeting
- ▶ May: Applied for additional funding via UNC Rural and requested funding via UNC Health Foundation; launched planning workgroups; hosted community partner-led “Welcome to Chatham County” orientations for students
- ▶ June: Received notice of Gillings funding denial but secured UNC Rural & UNC Health Foundation funding; confirmed proposed Hub location and obtained necessary permits; formally established Hub as nonprofit corporation; secured *pro bono* legal help to develop vendor agreements
- ▶ July: Recruited vendor participants; recruited and hired Hub Coordinator; secured Hub distribution day employees via partnership with temp agency; set up Hub bank account, website, Facebook page, and online ordering platform
- ▶ August: Launched Food Hub operations!
- ▶ October: Hub closeout after 11 weeks of sales