

An Epic-Cure to Crisis Response

Executive Summary

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The original intent of the project was to address the complex sustainability issue of systematic food waste by creating an educational guide for creating a food-saving organization and divert edible food from landfills. The guide was going to be based on a nonprofit organization my family and I founded called Epic-Cure, that has activated programs that serve to relieve community food insecurity, encourage community connectedness, support environmental health, and empower youth with entrepreneurial opportunities. However, since the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus, the original scope and plan of this project has shifted considerably. I decided to put the guide on hold so that I could step into a space of agency via working in real time, to adapt my organization so that we can continue to serve the community when we are most needed. In order to sustain the wellbeing of our communities, the adaptation of a food aid service in the time of the crisis is an imminent need. This project shift not only serves to provide emergency relief, but also to identify gaps in the food distribution system and the supply chains that NGOs like Epic-Cure rely on so that we might be more resilient in the face of future shocks to the systems.

Due to the nature and needs of the crisis, I had to shift my approach on the project from a consultant role to being an active team leader, working alongside the community and all levels of our organization to address the current crisis. By working onsite at my organization's facility, I have been able to address the unfolding barriers to our service, to ensure that we can continue to aid the community through this tumultuous time. I developed an interdisciplinary team consisting of healthcare professionals, law enforcement, economists, and leaders from national food aid organizations. Our approach was strengthened by the diversity of our team and the development of partnerships with other food aid services, food manufactures and retailers, and federal agencies like USDA. We have been able to satisfy growing demand while taking all known precautions we can to ensure the health and wellbeing of our team and the people we serve. I have worked to document changes we make to our distribution

process as they happen, so that post-crisis, I will have the necessary data to record our best practices and areas of improvement. This situation has taught my organization that non-profit food distributors need to be adaptable, establish reliable pathways to quickly increase distribution capacity in crisis situations, and not return to a “business-as-usual” model post-crisis. Once I finish collecting and analyzing my data, I will be creating an emergency preparedness guide of some sort should a similar situation come up in the future.

Upon my preliminary analysis, I have found that our efforts to scale up quickly have been successful. Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, Epic-Cure was still in its early development stages, slowly building its capacity to expand service in the community. We had reached four distributions per week serving on average 400 families a week with food and hygiene products we rescued from grocery outlets. Although we were efficient, we could not have predicted the impact we would soon have. Since the crisis was presented and seeing almost half of the food aid services in our country halting their aid, we worked quickly to plan how we would accommodate for the increase of need during a time in which our typical food supply chain would be greatly disrupted. The actions we have taken to accommodate the growing need include partnering with the USDA and Feeding America, working with food distributors including KeHe and Sysco, renting a refrigerated truck and a box truck for extra storage and mobilization of distributions, applying for grants for increased operating costs, and working with medical professionals to ensure the health of our volunteers and clients. We have been able to increase our distributions to eight distributions on average per week, now serving 1,200 families per week. This is not only a solution that provides timely community relief, but also works to address the sustainability challenges onset by food waste.

I have approached this project not solely as an immediate relief service project, but as an opportunity to observe the fragility of the globalized and capitalistic systems that the U.S. is dependent on. It is an opportunity to see the systematic weaknesses that are normally hidden or overlooked. For Epic-Cure, it is an opportunity to think not just about the short-term sustainability of our community, but also about what we can develop so that after when things begin to normalize we may reach a more resilient state.