

Health

Hungry Americans hit

Food allergies impede search for safe meals

SACRAMENTO, California, June 13, (AP): When Emily Brown, a Kansas City mother, couldn't find foods that her 2-year-old with multiple food allergies could eat at a local food pantry, she mustered up the courage to ask about gluten-free foods or dairy alternatives.

The response: "You got something." The only things her daughter could eat were potatoes and salsa. "It took, really, all of my strength to make it to the car," she said. "I cried in the car and then I just thought to myself, 'We cannot be the only family, I cannot be the only mother, struggling with this.'"

For the millions of Americans newly experiencing food insecurity during the pandemic, a particular crisis is hitting those with food allergies and intolerances: Most charitable and government food programs offer limited options.



Carter

While some pantries maintain gluten-free shelves or post allergen information, most were forced to limit clients choices last year, instead turning to contactless models where clients drive up and take a pre-made bag of food.

"Everybody deserves an equal opportunity to select their own foods," said **Carla Carter**, director of outreach and programming at the National Celiac Association. But, she said,

"COVID drastically changed that into: 'Here's a box of food, good luck.'"

Those signing up for government assistance face similar problems. The program for women, infants and children - known as WIC - offers a substitute for peanut butter: It's beans, not exactly useful for making sandwiches. Soy milk is a substitute for cow's milk, but some people, like Brown's child, can't have either.

Food stamps, or SNAP, let families choose what to buy, but specialized foods - like gluten free bread or sunflower seed butter - are often far more expensive. In some stores, the latter costs triple the cost of store-brand peanut butter, gluten free flour costs four times a standard bag, and even the cheapest dairy milk alternatives are often double the price.

Insecure

Feeding America, the nation's largest anti-hunger organization, hasn't gathered data on the overlap between hunger and food allergies or intolerance. But it's likely millions of Americans who are food insecure face some limits on what they can eat. An estimated 32 million people have a food allergy, and 85 million people live in a household where someone has a food allergy or intolerance, according to Food Allergy Research & Education, which advocates for people with allergies. About 1% of people are diagnosed with Celiac disease, which means they can't consume gluten, and about 6% of people have a non-Celiac gluten sensitivity Carter said.

Eight years after her food pantry experience, Brown is now one of the few people running a program dedicated to helping people with allergies and intolerance access safe foods.

Brown's nonprofit, the Food Equality Initiative, serves about 200 families with Celiac or food allergies, providing them \$150 per month to use in an online marketplace with allergy-friendly foods. Some of her clients use the benefit to supplement government assistance programs.

Dietician Kate Scarlata is among advocates trying to change the conversation around food insecurity by promoting what she calls a more dignified approach. She specializes in irritable bowel syndrome, which can cause stomach pain, diarrhea and constipation when people consume certain foods including garlic and onion, ingredients found in many shelf-stable products like sauces and soups.

She launched a tour of food pantries in April to raise awareness, and she found many of those she visited weren't asking people if they had intolerances or special dietary needs.

Charitable food programs can start with a few simple questions she said: "Are you on a special diet? Are there any foods that bother you?"

Brown, meanwhile, is working with Drs. Ruchi Gupta and Lucy Bilaver at the Center for Food Allergy & Asthma Research at Northwestern University to gather better information on how many people with allergies are food insecure, because no comprehensive data exists.

"The challenge we have is that the way we address food insecurity and food programming here in the U.S. is just so general," Brown said.

As the pandemic risks wane, advocates hope to see a return to client choice programs. That's the model Claudia Montenegro uses at her San Diego pantry, Porchlight Community Services, which is dedicated to serving people with food allergies.

In 2016, Montenegro was struggling to afford allergy friendly foods to meet her gluten and dairy intolerances.

She and some friends decided to pool their money so they could buy in bulk and look for sales. Word of mouth grew, and she was soon distributing food from her porch.

Today, Porchlight's grown to a full-fledged, volunteer-run food pantry serving people allergic to nuts, dairy, gluten and wheat, shellfish, egg and soy, and those who are diabetic.

Clients are asked to chip in \$35 per week if they can, but those who can't pay are still welcome. Volunteers buy all the food themselves, and shoppers can choose items like coconut-based yogurts, nut butters, lactose-free milk and gluten-free flour.

Elizabeth Shoemaker turned to Porchlight during the pandemic, after a hip replacement caused her to lose her job, her relationship and her place to live. At one point, her food assistance payments decreased from \$200 to \$20. She developed a gluten intolerance but struggled to afford gluten-free products until she found Porchlight, provides those and caters well to her mainly vegetable-based diet.

She can't afford the fee, so she volunteers at the pantry. "I know now I can depend on them the next week, so I don't have to hoard food," she said.

Also:

ROME: Pope Francis demanded Sunday that humanitarian aid reach hungry people in the war-torn **Tigray** region of northern **Ethiopia**, where Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers are blocking food deliveries and other assistance.

Francis called for an immediate end to the fighting in Tigray, the return of social harmony and for "all food aid and health care assistance to be guaranteed."

Speaking at his Sunday noon blessing, Francis said he was thinking of the people of Tigray who have been "struck by a grave humanitarian crisis that has exposed the poorest to famine. Today there is famine! There is hunger!"

The United Nations and aid groups say more than 350,000 people in Tigray face famine and 2 million more are a step away from the worst famine since 2011 in **Somalia**. Farmers, aid workers and local officials say food has been turned into a weapon of war, with soldiers blocking or stealing food aid.

More than 2 million of Tigray's 6 million people have already fled, unable to harvest their crops. The war in Tigray started in November, shortly before the harvest season, as an attempt by Ethiopian Prime Minister **Abiy Ahmed** to disarm the region's rebellious leaders.

On one side are guerrillas loyal to the ousted and now-fugitive leaders of Tigray. On the other are Ethiopian government troops, allied troops from neighboring Eritrea and militias from Ethiopia's Amhara ethnic group who see themselves as rivals to the Tigrayan guerrillas.



Emily Brown sits with her daughters Hannah, 7, (left), and Catherine, 9, outside her office June 9, in Kansas City, Mo. Brown runs a nonprofit service to help families with food allergies access safe and healthy foods which she started after having difficulty obtaining food for her daughters who have numerous food allergies. (AP)

Coronavirus

Developing world clamoring for doses to stem infections

US vaccine surplus grows by the day

LOS ANGELES, June 13, (AP): In Tennessee and North Carolina, demand for the COVID-19 vaccine has slowed down so much that they have given millions of doses back to the federal government, even though less than half of their total populations are vaccinated.

Oklahoma has not asked for new doses from the government for more than a month, spurning its 200,000-a-week allotment. Around the country, states are rushing to use up doses before they expire this summer.

The US is confronted with an ever-growing surplus of coronavirus vaccine, looming expiration dates and stubbornly lagging demand at a time when the developing world is clamoring for doses to stem a rise in infections.

Million-dollar prizes, free beer and marijuana, raffled-off hunting rifles and countless other giveaways around the country have failed to significantly move the needle on vaccine hesitancy, raising the specter of new outbreaks.

The stockpiles are becoming more daunting each week. Oklahoma has more than 700,000 doses on shelves but is administering only 4,500 a day and has 27,000 Pfizer and Moderna doses that are set to expire at the end of the month.

Millions of Johnson & Johnson doses nationwide were set to expire this month before the government extended their dates by six weeks, but some leaders acknowledge it will be difficult to use them up even by then.

"We really cannot let doses expire. That would be a real outrage, given the need to get vaccines to some under-vaccinated communities in the US and the glaring gap in vaccinations and the inequity of vaccinations that we have globally," said Dr. Kirsten Bibbins-Domingo, chair of epidemiology and biostatistics at the University of California, San Francisco.

The US averaged about 870,000 new injections per day at the end of last week, down sharply from a high of about 3.3 million a day on average in mid-April, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

President Joe Biden wants to have 70% of the adult US population at least partially vaccinated by July 4. But the US could well fail to meet that target. As of Friday, 64% of Americans 18 and older had had at least one dose, by the CDC's count.

Some states, especially in the Northeast, have already reached that 70% goal for adults, while places like Mississippi and Alabama are nowhere close. Mississippi, in fact, has been

transferring large quantities of vaccine to other states and the federal government.

Amid the glut, the White House has announced plans to share 80 million doses globally by the end of June and also buy 500 million more doses of the Pfizer vaccine and donate them to 92 lower-income countries and the African Union over the next year.

With demand stronger in Maine and Rhode Island, the two states received 32,400 doses each from Mississippi, where only about one-third of the state is at least partially vaccinated. Mississippi has also transferred 800,000 doses to a federal vaccine pool. The state has seen demand plunge to levels not seen since the opening weeks of the vaccine rollout, with only 18,400 doses administered there this week.

Mississippi State Health Officer Dr. Thomas Dobbs said Friday that the state health department was more than happy to help states in the Northeast.

"In Mississippi, if people don't understand how important it is to keep alive, we want to protect other Americans," he said.

Each week, states are allotted a number of doses from the government and are allowed to order shots from that. But more states, including Oklahoma, Alabama, Utah, Delaware and New Hampshire, have stopped placing orders for new doses in recent weeks because they have such a large inventory. That has added to the ballooning federal stockpile.

Administered

Those skipping the vaccine include Benjamin Schlink of Pearl, Mississippi, who said he believes he is healthy enough to fight the illness.

"The way I look at it, I don't worry about it, because God is in control," he said. "If God wants you to have it, you'll have it."

Gayle Charnley, 69, said some of her neighbors in the small town think she should get the shot, but she is not planning on it. "They're just forcing them on people as fast as they can get them, and we don't know what the long-term effects are going to be," she said.

Hundreds of millions of vaccine doses have been administered around the world with intense safety monitoring, and few serious risks have been identified.

Some of the demand slowdown is a natural part of the rollout process. In Massachusetts, 68% of people have a first dose and the mass vaccination sites are shutting down as officials shift to harder-to-reach places, such as

drug treatment centers.

Demand has been especially low for the J&J vaccine, a one-shot, easy-to-store formula that held great promise because of its convenience but whose rollout has been hurt by links to a rare blood clot disorder and contamination problems at a Baltimore factory.

Bibbins-Domingo said that with many parts of the world desperate for doses, the U.S. has a moral obligation not to waste the J&J formula, which is especially useful in remote areas, among people who are homeless and in rural communities.

"At all costs, we need to make sure that those doses get to people who can use them," she said.

In West Virginia, demand has nearly dropped off completely for the J&J vaccine. About 42% of the total population there has gotten at least one dose.

That's in spite of a sweepstakes raffling off everything from cash to hunting rifles to pickup trucks. When Ohio kicked off a trend of million-dollar prize drawings a few weeks ago, officials saw a robust 43% increase in vaccination numbers - but only for the first week.

In North Carolina, \$25 cash cards helped bring people to vaccine clinics, but even so, the state isn't ordering any new doses from the government for the second week in a row.

Instead, the state has given back 1.2 million doses. In Tennessee, 2.4 million have been returned to the federal pool. It's a disappointing development to William Schaffner, a professor of preventive medicine at Vanderbilt University's medical school in Nashville.

"If the governor is not making an impassioned plea - and ours hasn't - then I look to local leaders of every kind," he said.

In Colorado, which has given over 175,000 back to the federal pool, there's a million-dollar lottery, and drag queens have begun beckoning people at clinics during Pride Month. In New Mexico, the nation's biggest lottery grand prize, \$5 million, halted a downward trend in vaccinations and may have even caused a slight improvement, officials said. Washington state allowed marijuana stores to offer free joints this week.

While incentive programs may not have sent vaccination rates soaring, they are still a worthwhile tool for states working through the difficult "last mile" of a marathon, said Dr. Nirav Shah, head of the Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention and president of the Association of State and Territorial Health Officers.



Moderna and Pfizer COVID-19 vaccines sit in a refrigerator at a mass-vaccination site at the former Citizens Bank headquarters in Cranston, R.I., June 10. The US is confronted with an ever-growing surplus of COVID-19 vaccines, looming expiration dates and stubbornly lagging demand at a time when the developing world is clamoring for doses to stem a rise in infections. (AP)



Bezos

Joughin

Discovery

\$28m to fly in space: An auction for a ride into space next month alongside **Jeff Bezos** and his brother ended with a winning \$28 million bid Saturday.

The Amazon founder's rocket company, Blue Origin, did not disclose the winner's name following the live online auction. The identity will be revealed in a couple weeks - closer to the brief up-and-down flight from West Texas on July 20, the 52nd anniversary of Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin's moon landing.

It will be the first launch of Blue Origin's New Shepard rocket with people on board, kicking off the company's space tourism business. Fifteen previous test flights of the reusable rocket and capsule since 2015 - short hops lasting about 10 minutes - were all successful.

Saturday's auction followed more than a month of online bidding that reached \$4.8 million by Friday. More than 7,500 people from 159 countries registered to bid, according to Blue Origin. More than 20 bidders - the high rollers - took part in Saturday's auction.

Bezos announced Monday that he and his younger brother, Mark, would be on board New Shepard's first crew flight; the news quickly boosted bidding. The winning amount is being donated to Blue Origin's Club for the Future, an educational effort to promote science and tech among young people. (AP)

Ice shelf breaking up faster: A critical Antarctic glacier is looking more vulnerable as satellite images show the ice shelf that blocks it from collapsing into the sea is breaking up much faster than before and spawning huge icebergs, a new study says.

The Pine Island Glacier's ice shelf loss accelerated in 2017, causing scientists to worry that with climate change the glacier's collapse could happen quicker than the many centuries predicted. The floating ice shelf acts like a cork in a bottle for the fast-melting glacier and prevents its much larger ice mass from flowing into the ocean.

That ice shelf has retreated by 12 miles (20 kilometers) between 2017 and 2020, according to a study in Friday's Science Advances. The crumbling shelf was caught on time-lapse video from a European satellite that takes pictures every six days.

"You can see stuff just tearing apart," said study lead author **Ian Joughin**, a University of Washington glaciologist. "So it almost looks like the speed-up itself is weakening the glacier... And so far we've lost maybe 20% of the main shelf."

Between 2017 and 2020, there were three large breakup events, creating ice-

bergs more than 5 miles (8 kilometers) long and 22 miles (36 kilometers) wide, which then split into lots of littler pieces, Joughin said. (AP)

Sinkhole swallows land: A large sinkhole that appeared in late May at a farm in central Mexico has grown larger than a football field, begun swallowing a house and trapped two dogs in its

depths. The government of the central state of Puebla said it had managed to pull the two dogs out of the sinkhole, after emotional requests from animal lovers to rescue them. They had been trapped for about four days on a ledge on the sheer sides of the hole dropping 50 feet (15 meters) to water.

Because the loose soil at the edges keeps collapsing into the water at the bottom of the pit, for days it was considered too dangerous to try to rescue the animals.

But a firefighter descended into the pit, in part by using a ladder to steady the soil on the edge. His colleagues were seen standing farther back using ropes and a pulley system to haul up cages carrying the two dogs.

The state government distributed photos of the dogs, named Spay and Spike, looking alert and in the care of veterinarians.

The dogs were apparently playing in the farm field surrounding the sinkhole when they fell in.

The sinkhole is now over 400 feet (125 meters) across in some places, and may be 150 deep (45 meters) at its deepest point. It is hard to tell, because water fills the crater. (AP)



A health worker persuades a homeless man to get himself inoculated against the coronavirus in Guwahati, India, June 13. (AP)