

# Increasing Access to Food through a Rural Community Pharmacy Initiative

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## Introduction

In this reflection paper, we describe a Purdue College of Pharmacy-led project aimed at addressing temporary food insecurity needs during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. Dr. Jasmine Gonzalvo, Director of the Center for Health Equity and Innovation (CHEqI), led a small team of four doctoral pharmacy students to reach out to independent pharmacies providing medication delivery services to their clients. The intent was to utilize the existing infrastructure of medication delivery for food box distribution to those who were most in need, either due to being homebound or due to economic hardship.

According to the National Center for Health Statistics, from 2013-2016, 48.4% of Americans reported taking a prescription medication in the last 30 days.<sup>2</sup> Community pharmacists play a vital role filling these prescription medications for individuals with acute or chronic conditions. In Indiana, there are almost 800 community pharmacies (i.e. CVS, Walgreens, Walmart, etc.) and over 200 independently-owned pharmacies.<sup>3</sup> During the COVID-19 pandemic, community pharmacies have either continued or implemented new medication delivery services to ensure that individuals in their communities continue to receive needed medications. In an effort to support social distancing, The Center for Health Equity and Innovation (CHEqI) at Purdue in collaboration with two doctoral pharmacy students created a statewide resource listing Indiana-based pharmacies with drive-thru and delivery services.<sup>4</sup> The resource was distributed widely to the public on social media and available on a variety of websites. See Appendix A.

The Purdue University College of Pharmacy graduates approximately 150 doctoral-level pharmacy students annually. Students complete two years of pre-pharmacy requirements before applying to the four-year professional phase of the pharmacy curriculum. During the professional phase, classroom learning spans clinical pharmacy concepts, public health, administrative, and

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<sup>2</sup><https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/drug-use-therapeutic.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Pharmacy numbers were compiled from information available on cvs.com, walgreens.com, and pcamnet.org

<sup>4</sup> Resource available at: [bit.ly/PurduePharmacyCOVID](http://bit.ly/PurduePharmacyCOVID).

patient safety topics and is supplemented by experiential learning through hands-on laboratories and a final year of experiential rotations. During the final year, student pharmacists serve patients in community pharmacies, medical clinics, hospitals, and non-traditional environments across a variety of local and international settings. Pharmacy students are commonly encouraged to engage in outreach projects, oftentimes through student organizations or faculty projects.

### **Development of Our Project**

The Indiana Association for Diabetes Care and Education Specialists (IN ADCES) was offering a funding opportunity of \$1000 in support of a local COVID-related initiative. In response to this opportunity, four pharmacy students in collaboration with CHEqI decided to identify a community pharmacy that can provide food assistance to their existing clients who may be facing food insecurity. As mentioned previously, community pharmacies commonly offer medication delivery services. These services are often offered free of charge to pharmacy clientele within a certain geographic radius. We wanted to add food boxes to the existing infrastructure of free medication delivery. The proposed idea presented an innovative solution for food insecurity using existing processes offered by a community pharmacy.

Early in the pandemic, we assumed that unemployment rates would continue to rise and that food assistance needs would also increase for Hoosier families. For example, food banks and pantries were making increasing requests, on social media, for volunteers and donations as the pandemic continued. This assumption was subsequently supported by the Monthly Management Report from the Division of Family Resources with the Indiana Family and Social Services Administration that lists Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) monthly statistics across Indiana. According to the Indiana Family and Social Services Administration, statewide, greater numbers of Hoosier families required SNAP and TANF benefits in April and May 2020 compared to previous months.<sup>5</sup> These trends stood out to the team as an area to use our resources to help.

The pharmacy students utilized the aforementioned resource listing of pharmacies offering medication delivery to reach out by phone to assess initial interest in and feasibility of this initiative. Several pharmacies expressed interest, although one pharmacy clearly stood out from the rest – JR Pharmacy, an independent community pharmacy with four branches across Terre Haute, Indiana. One of their pharmacies is located in Baesler’s Market and presented a unique opportunity to provide food assistance. Not only was the pharmacy conveniently located in the Market, but the staff members were eager for an opportunity to support their clientele and meet food insecurity needs during the pandemic. According to the Indiana Family and Social Services Administration information for Vigo County, JR Pharmacy has also seen a consistent increase in the numbers of families requiring TANF and SNAP benefits.<sup>6</sup>

The leadership team with IN ADCES subsequently selected our initiative for the \$1000 COVID-relief fund grant. To facilitate the implementation of this project for the pharmacy and market staff, the pharmacy students then provided a brief food screening assessment and a listing of sample food items to include in a nutritious food box. Food screening questions included, “We worried whether our food would run out before we got money to buy more. Was that often

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<sup>5</sup> [https://www.in.gov/fssa/files/MMR-STATEWIDE-en-us\\_May-2020.pdf](https://www.in.gov/fssa/files/MMR-STATEWIDE-en-us_May-2020.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.in.gov/fssa/files/counties/MMR-Vigo-en-us.pdf>

true, sometimes true, or never true for your household in the last few weeks?” and “The food we bought just didn’t last, and we didn’t have money to get more. Was that often true, sometimes true, or never true for your household in the last few weeks?” A response of “often true” or “sometimes true” to either question indicated a positive screen for food insecurity. Some suggestions on the list of foods developed by the students included canned protein (tuna, chicken, or ham), canned vegetables, canned fruit, canned beans, peanut butter, soup, pasta, oatmeal, nuts, rice, and others. See Appendix B.

The pharmacy staff worked with employees of Baesler’s Market to purchase and assemble the food boxes that contained the non-perishable foods on the lists provided by the students. The food boxes were stored in the pharmacy until they were scheduled to go out with the medication deliveries. The pharmacy staff and medication delivery drivers’ familiarity with JR Pharmacy clientele allowed them to easily identify families facing food insecurity.

### **Our Reflections on Project Efforts**

Baesler’s market staff was able to assemble a total of 36 food boxes using the suggested food items at a cost of just under \$28.00 each. Food boxes were then distributed free of charge over the following three weeks through the medication delivery services.

Mywabashvalley.com, a local Wabash/West Vigo news station featured our collaboration with a short news story.<sup>7</sup> Lori Eldred, a pharmacist at JR Pharmacy, involved with the food box project commented, “We already provide free delivery for prescriptions, and so we’re able to deliver this while we are delivering prescriptions to people and so it worked out well that we were able to coordinate the two. We’re sure it will help, I mean unfortunately I have some patients that have to choose between buying their prescriptions or paying another bill or you know filling up their grocery cart, so I’m sure it will help several people in the community.”

Although we did not conduct a formal assessment for this project, based on verbal feedback, the project had a positive impact for the clients of JR Pharmacy. Ron Vencel, president of JR Pharmacy said, “Once members of the community heard about this program, we started getting calls from more people who needed help getting enough food for their families. There isn’t a shortage of people who need help right now. The people who received this food assistance were really grateful.”

The doctoral pharmacy students and CHEqI faculty appreciated the opportunity to partner with the pharmacists dedicating time and effort to this initiative. Rachael Smith, a recent pharmacy graduate who participated in this project, commented, “Having just finished three months of rotations at an independent pharmacy offering everything from free delivery to diabetes education classes, I saw firsthand how much a pharmacy could do for their patients and the impact they could have in their community. With the sudden shift in everyday life due to COVID-19, I knew those patients were relying on their pharmacies for more than just medications. I leapt at the chance to work with a pharmacy to further expand their patient services in a time of crisis – especially those with food insecurities who need essential items.” Claire Schumann, another recent pharmacy graduate supporting this project said, “I think that it

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.mywabashvalley.com/top-news/jr-pharmacy-and-baeslers-making-food-baskets-for-the-community/>

is easy during this time to feel stuck, like you can't do anything to help when there are so many people who need it. When this opportunity presented itself, I was eager to team up with my peers to make even just a small impact on our community here in Indiana.”

We were impressed by JR pharmacy staff's willingness to engage with our team in the spirit of helping their clients. The pharmacy staff were not interested in the modest amount of money. They were grateful for the idea and took immediate action to get the food to their clients in need. This effort was motivated and accomplished by pharmacy and market staff who simply care about their community. The pharmacy and market staff in this Hoosier community stepped up during a time when their clients were in need of assistance.

A similar positive attitude from volunteers and staff is necessary to support the success of anyone looking to replicate and scale this project to reach larger numbers of people. One factor limiting the scalability of this project is the funding required to procure the non-perishable food items. Community pharmacies located within larger grocers may have the opportunity for food supplies to be donated on a larger scale and subsequently distributed with the medication deliveries through the pharmacy. Alternatively, particularly in urban areas, the opportunity exists to partner with food banks who could provide pre-prepared food boxes to pharmacies who in turn would be responsible for distribution to those who may be homebound and otherwise unable to receive services from a food bank. The convenience of having non-perishable foods and medications delivered together in rural or urban settings presents a novel area of research suitable for a larger-scale project.

From the pharmacy student perspective, students could advocate for comparable initiatives while on experiential rotations or while working in community pharmacies. Student organizations could organize food donation drives and subsequently partner with community pharmacies providing medication delivery services. Pharmacy students could collaborate with other Colleges and Departments across the University, such as Nutrition Science, Agriculture, or Public Health to enhance collective efforts and impact. Given adequate time and resources, students would likely greatly improve the impact and scalability of this effort.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

This project was a unique collaboration between a community pharmacy, doctoral pharmacy students, CHEqI, and IN ADCES. We made every effort to maximize the use of existing infrastructure without placing additional strain on the pharmacy or market staff. In reality, pharmacy staff did not implement the brief food security screening questions for two reasons. Firstly, pharmacy staff were able to easily identify specific clients who they knew were in need of immediate food assistance. Secondly, implementation of the food assessment screening required additional outreach time and effort to identify food insecure clients. Responsibilities related to medication filling, dispensing, and counseling took priority over activities related to this project.

Food costs likely could have been decreased through collaboration with a food bank partner or low-cost grocer, which would have allowed for a greater number of food boxes to be distributed. However, in initial exploratory discussions of this project, it became clear that during the COVID-19 pandemic, food bank resources were already operating beyond capacity given the

substantial increase in food insecurity across the State. JR Pharmacy's position within Baesler's Market presented the convenient opportunity for the objectives of this effort, while partnership with a food bank or low-cost grocer outside of the pharmacy environment would have required additional time, effort, and resources to coordinate.

The \$1000 used to fund this effort provided 36 families with temporary food assistance in an area with increased numbers of people with food insecurity in the midst of the pandemic. Sustained funding for this initiative likely could have resulted in continued food sources for families with food insecurity and process improvements which would have helped inform similar projects in the future. Although IN ADCES explored other funding opportunities, none proved fruitful.

JR Pharmacy was a unique community pharmacy with altruistic staff members who were willing to go above and beyond to help their clients. This connection to the community facilitated the success of our initiative, consistent with other types of COVID-related projects motivated by the spirit of altruism. Larger community pharmacies, such as Walgreens, CVS, or Walmart, are also traditionally located alongside food resources and may offer delivery in certain areas, which presents an opportunity for similar initiatives. Hospital pharmacies offering medication delivery services and with access to food services could also use a similar model in times of need.

Community pharmacies who offer local delivery services located within grocery stores present a unique opportunity to provide food assistance along with free medication deliveries. Other pharmacies with medication delivery options may consider implementing similar initiatives during times of need. The key components of this effort were a local not-for-profit organization with modest resources to fund a small initiative, utilization of existing infrastructure to facilitate project objectives, and individuals with a strong willingness to help.

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**Appendix A**  
**Websites who shared Pharmacy Resource**

<b>Organization</b>	<b>Website</b>
1340 AM WBIW	<a href="http://www.wbiw.com/2020/04/02/covid-19-resources-for-older-adults-and-their-families/">http://www.wbiw.com/2020/04/02/covid-19-resources-for-older-adults-and-their-families/</a>
Bona Vista	<a href="http://bonavista.org/coronavirus-covid-19-agency-updates/">http://bonavista.org/coronavirus-covid-19-agency-updates/</a>
Family Voices Indiana	<a href="https://www.scribd.com/document/454642636/Indiana-Pharmacy-Social-Distancing-Options">https://www.scribd.com/document/454642636/Indiana-Pharmacy-Social-Distancing-Options</a>
Indiana FSSA Division of Aging	<a href="https://www.in.gov/fssa/files/COVID-19_Resources_4_older_adults_families.pdf">https://www.in.gov/fssa/files/COVID-19_Resources_4_older_adults_families.pdf</a>
Indiana Pharmacists Association	<a href="https://www.indianapharmacists.org/covid-19-resources/">https://www.indianapharmacists.org/covid-19-resources/</a>
Indiana Senate Democrats	<a href="https://www.indianasenatedemocrats.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Indiana-Pharmacy-Social-Distancing-Options.pdf">https://www.indianasenatedemocrats.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Indiana-Pharmacy-Social-Distancing-Options.pdf</a>
Indiana University, Child and Adolescent Mental Health	<a href="https://camhecho.iu.edu/resources/downloads/COVID%20Resources%20from%203-26-20.pdf">https://camhecho.iu.edu/resources/downloads/COVID%20Resources%20from%203-26-20.pdf</a>
Purdue University College of Pharmacy, Office of Continuing Education	<a href="https://ce.pharmacy.purdue.edu/continue-education/covid-19">https://ce.pharmacy.purdue.edu/continue-education/covid-19</a>
Purdue University Human Resources website	<a href="https://www.purdue.edu/hr/COVID-19/index.php">https://www.purdue.edu/hr/COVID-19/index.php</a>
The Herald Bulletin	<a href="https://www.heraldbulletin.com/opinion/letters_to_the_editor/guest-viewpoint-indiana-pharmacists-association-offers-ways-to-help-protect-pharmacists/article_505ce2ae-71fa-11ea-ae24-ef255e60a404.html">https://www.heraldbulletin.com/opinion/letters_to_the_editor/guest-viewpoint-indiana-pharmacists-association-offers-ways-to-help-protect-pharmacists/article_505ce2ae-71fa-11ea-ae24-ef255e60a404.html</a>

**Appendix B**  
**Food Screening Questionnaire**



**Food Security Screening**

First Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Last Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Correct Address Confirmed:  Yes  No

I'm going to read you two statements that people have made about their food situation. For each statement, please tell me whether the statement was **often true**, **sometimes true**, or **never true** for your household in the last 12 months.

1. "We worried whether our food would run out before we got money to buy more."

Was that **often true**, **sometimes true**, or **never true** for your household in the last 2-4 weeks?

- Often True  
 Sometimes True  
 Never True

2. "The food we bought just didn't last, and we didn't have money to get more."

Was that **often true**, **sometimes true**, or **never true** for your household in the last 2-4 weeks?

- Often True  
 Sometimes True  
 Never True

**A response of "often true" or "sometimes true" to either question = positive screen for Food Insecurity and qualifies for food boxes.**