Background

COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization on March 11, 2020 (Adhanom, 2020). In response, widespread social distancing and lockdowns were implemented globally, including in Canada. These measures resulted in high levels of unemployment, as well as disruptions to businesses and organizations. Many aspects of the food system in Canada were affected, including the charitable food sector. Food banks and other charitable food organizations faced increased demand for their services, while dealing with challenges of meeting new public health requirements.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the impact of COVID-19 on charitable food organizations in Manitoba and challenges faced during the first wave of the pandemic.

Research Question

What challenges arose in charitable food organizations from COVID-19?

Methods

Participants were selected from a variety of Manitoba urban, rural and northern charitable food organizations. A provincial dietitian network was used to create a list of potential organizations, who were contacted to participate. 10 charitable food directors/managers consented to data collection.

Semi-structured phone interviews took place during June and July 2020. Interviews were recorded and then transcribed verbatim. Thematic content analysis was used to define themes and sub-themes.

Results

**Summary of Results**

This study unveiled numerous challenges that charitable food organizations experienced due to COVID-19.

**Limited Resources and Supplies**

Participants reported a number of challenges related to limited resources. This included challenges of limited human resources (staff and volunteers), food, as well as funding.

**Rapid Changes**

There were rapid changes regarding demand and daily operations. These quick-passed changes contributed to communication issues.

**Communication Issues**

Communication issues for the charitable food sector included problems between other organizations, within the organization, and with clients. These were all exacerbated by limited communication and support from the government.

**Heightened Emotions**

Taken together, these challenges led to heightened emotions, causing tension within the organization and community.

**Monetary Resources**

“...Our costs went through the roof.”

**Structural Supports**

“If we had someone who could’ve told us maybe just improve stuff, not to criticize but to say do certain things that would help...there’s been no contact from public health.”

**Human Resources**

“I’d say another challenge is that we’ve lost most of our volunteers.”

**Food Supplies**

“We couldn’t always just place an order and get what we wanted.”

**Information Overload**

“It was difficult for people to be able to respond to the questions because their answers were changing, you know, day-by-day or week-by-week.”

**Within Organizations**

“We just wanted to make sure there was no duplication of service. And telling people that we’re still open for business. So yeah, we just had to do some telephone calls and telling people know that we’re still around, and we’ll find out what they’re doing.”

**Between Organizations and Clients**

“Some people must’ve assumed, without even hearing from us, that we were closed.”

**Demand**

“In the first 2 weeks our numbers we jumping and at that rate we were able to forecast that by the end of our first month of COVID we would see a 30% increase of food bank users, and that was true.”

**Operations**

“That day we decided we would cancel the Saturday programs that were about to happen.”

**Overwhelmed**

“I felt like our work was so busy it’s kind of a blur.”

**Fear and Anxiety**

“We’ve got people who are very fearful or they’ve got compromised immune systems and whatever as medical conditions and they’re not prepared to ah take that risk.”

**Dignity**

“We didn’t [allow everyone to wait inside], but we just had a procedure in place for those that, for who we knew it was an important part of their dignity and in the moment.”

**Social Isolation**

“The isolation is a killer for a lot of seniors.”

Significance and Future Work

This study highlights the impact the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic has had on charitable food organizations in Manitoba. Results can be used to inform strategies to more effectively address food insecurity for the remainder of the pandemic.

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References