



Practical Advice on COVID-19

Purchase and Distribution of Food

- Our shared firsthand experiences on relief actions for Hubei, China
- Joint efforts of volunteers

9 Sections with Practical Advice:

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-  Emergency Supply of Oxygen Concentrators
-  Home Care for COVID-19 Patients
-  Preparation for Volunteers
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-  End-of-life Care
-  Purchase and Distribution of Food
-  Coordinating Aid
-  Public Health Emergency Response Policies

Applicable to:

Volunteers, healthcare workers, families of COVID-19 infected people who are being cared for at home, pregnant women and their families, families of terminally ill patients, foundations, non-profit organizations, and the public.

Languages:

Chinese/English/German/French/Italian/Spanish/
Swedish/Farsi

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武汉银杏在行动

Ginkgo Fellows in COVID-19 Relief Action

Community Collective Management of Food Purchases and Safe Distribution

As an affected area adopts more and more strict epidemic prevention measures or policies, some residents may not be able to go out and buy food because of strict isolation measures, and specific groups, such as solitary senior citizens, may lack convenient shopping conditions. How do we ensure that everyone has access to a stable source of food while obliged to stay at home during this special period?

This article describes a real case of community collective management of food purchasing (group buying) to illustrate how food purchasing and safe distribution is ensured during community isolation.

I. Investigate and Evaluate the Real Needs of the Community

Organizers of community collective food purchasing need to carry out investigations and evaluations based on local policies, community background, residents' needs (including special needs), and the group buying situation to determine the gap between food supply and residents' needs, so as to make appropriate purchasing strategies in accordance with current epidemic prevention policies and the specific community background.

Local policy	Requirements and updates of epidemic prevention laws and regulations.
Community background	The number of residents in need of help, the quantity of purchases, the availability of manpower (volunteers) and transportation.
Sourcing strategy	Purchase essential goods from clear and traceable sources, quality assurance and reasonable price.
Special needs	Special food requirements of specific people, such as babies, diabetics, sufferers from peanut allergies, the lactose intolerant, Muslims, and vegans.
Food suppliers	Supermarkets or stores in the community, check if they can meet the normal and special needs, including the diversity and quantity of goods.

I. Investigate and Evaluate the Real Needs of the Community

► Case: A survey of a residential community in Wuhan

Policy background

As the prevention and control of COVID-19 reached a critical point in Wuhan, all middle- to large-sized supermarkets and commercial stores only accepted group buying orders and no longer sold daily supplies to individuals as of February 18th. Meanwhile, Wuhan was continuing with strict management measures of community closure. Residents could only make purchases via group buying. The time for lifting the ban was undetermined.

Community background

There were 12 buildings, 576 households and more than 1700 people in the community. At the time, most households were retired senior residents and families with children. After the outbreak, two confirmed patients in this community were admitted to hospital for treatment, and their families to makeshift hospitals as mild patients. At the time of the investigation, the building the confirmed patients resided in had been isolated for more than 14 days. This community is a purely residential area without any commercial outlets.

Residents' needs

One month into the outbreak, residents had run out of food stored at home. Shortages of staples such as rice, noodles, flour, oil, and other food, could not be resolved within the community.

Current group buying situation

There was no recognized group buying organization. All group buying activities in various online communication groups (WeChat groups) were initiated by individuals or businesses. During the week before the investigation, there were multiple incidents of failure to receive goods after online payment, significant discrepancies between the quality and price of purchased food and so on. Regulated, affordable and high-quality supplies were urgently needed.

Special groups

There were many groups with special needs in the community, such as solitary senior citizens and Halal families whose special needs had to be considered.

In conclusion, the purchasing activities had to be carried out in accordance with the following requirements: with the approval of subdistrict offices and neighborhood committees, regular purchase of goods from clear and traceable sources, quality assurance and reasonable prices to ensure stable supplies of essential daily materials to residents.

II. Search for Food from Clear Sources and at Reasonable Prices

1. In accordance with the above principles, the community's collective management of food purchases considered the following factors overall:

- Merchants with business licenses and health permits.
- Merchants in the daily necessity supplier list issued by local governments.
- Choosing residents' familiar or trusted suppliers to effectively reduce communication costs.
- Being able to provide continuous and stable services during the outbreak.
- Supplying diverse goods to meet the needs of certain special groups.
- Being able to timely communicate and solve after-sales quality issues.
- Being able to deliver goods to the entrance of closed communities or nearby areas.
- Being able to provide "comfort foods".

2. Analysis of residents' psychological status:

After one month's strict lockdown, depleted food storage plus a lack of sustainable and safe food supply tended to generate severe anxiety and uneasiness among the residents, resulting in their going out to obtain food instead of staying at home, which in turn would have negative impacts on the prevention of the pandemic.

3. Comfort Food :

Comfort Food usually refers to food that can help people relieve tension, relax nerves, or cause nostalgia, characterized by high calories and high carbohydrate content, which can bring psychological comfort to the consumers.

► Case:

In a residential community in Wuhan, special snack packages consisted of foods such as biscuits, chocolates, etc. which were provided to children, and relieved their dissatisfaction at being locked up at home. Meanwhile, it gave a psychological boost to parents indicating that this inconvenience in life would only be temporary. Although snacks cannot satisfy appetites, they provided the comfort that filling foods cannot.

III. Develop Community Food Group Purchase and Communication Rules

- 1.** Organizers of a community's collective food purchases need to develop rules beforehand and communicate with residents via their most frequently used social media applications. (For residents who do not use social media apps because of age or other reasons, traditional ways of communication should be adopted one-on-one, e.g. phone calls, text messages, or emails.)
- 2.** Rules should be set before online social media groups are established. Group rules should take into account the identification of members, group targets, details about the sources of goods and their prices, information on the group purchase cycle, process, payment, pick-up, etc., roles and responsibilities of service team members, guidelines on commodity dispute resolution, caring principles for vulnerable groups, punishment or binding principles, and so on. Specific rules should be drafted in accordance with the local situation.
- 3.** To follow the principles of openness, transparency, and public supervision, after the group rules are drafted, sufficient communication needs to be conducted with participating residents. In addition to group members (community residents) as supervisors, third parties, such as members of the property owners committee, could be invited for supervision.
- 4.** Rules management should follow changes in government policies and the needs of the residents.

IV. Organize Online Social Groups and Carry Out Group Purchases

1. In accordance with the above rules, organizers of a community’s collective management of food purchases should establish online social groups for group purchases. Please note it is necessary to verify participants’ details to avoid the entry of residents from other districts and unidentified persons. Responsible group managers should invest plenty of time in timely responses to various questions from group members. Managers need to be patient about communication, not to avoid any question, and always adopt a friendly attitude.
2. Make a list of residents who cannot use social media applications, including at least their residential addresses and contact information.
3. Make a list of special needs. Be careful and error-free!
4. Once the online social groups and communication methods are in place, group purchases can be started after sufficient communication.
5. The main procedure of group purchasing is as follows:

<p>Order publication</p>	<p>a. The main procedure of group purchasing is as follows: Obtain a list of commodities from suppliers and supermarkets, which should include at least the product name, brand, specification, and unit price, for the reference of residents.</p> <hr/> <p>b. Confirmation of orders: After obtaining the commodity list, categorized goods should be published and communicated sufficiently to the social group members to ensure that the information and price of goods are fully understood and needs of residents can be identified and targeted.</p>
<p>Integration of orders</p>	<p>a. Conduct online ordering and payment collection via internet applications.</p> <hr/> <p>b. For groups who cannot use online ordering systems (e.g. senior citizens) and people with special needs, one-on-one offline ordering services must be provided. It is recommended to introduce and confirm orders to senior citizens via phone calls. People with special needs can communicate in separate groups, such as halal family groups, where only halal food information is provided, rather than the general list that may include pork and other non-halal foods.</p> <hr/> <p>c. Integrate online and offline orders and develop a final order.</p>
<p>Order confirmation and updates</p>	<p>Send the final order to suppliers, check and confirm that all ordered goods are well-stocked. If anything is in short supply, timely and public communication within the group (including offline and special groups) is needed before finalizing the order.</p>

V. Group Order and Payment; Establishment of Supportive and Loving Social Groups

1. Confirm orders with suppliers and supermarkets and make payments in the way agreed by both parties. Ask in advance if invoices are needed. (For those without access to online payment, alternatives, such as payment by mobile POS machines and in cash can be provided via prior negotiations).
2. Determine delivery time together. During the pandemic, delivery time may change constantly due to the unstable condition of logistics, goods, workers, etc. which should be understood and accepted. Please communicate with suppliers and group buying residents in time.
3. Changes and challenges in orders. During the pandemic, suppliers may not be able to provide all required orders due to shortages of certain goods, which may necessitate replacement with alternatives or refunds. It is necessary to communicate on that in advance with suppliers and explain the corresponding resolution to group buying residents.
4. Create an environment of mutual support to enhance harmony in social groups.
5. Topics in online social groups should be oriented to create a sense of safety. For example, group managers could encourage members to share photos of delicious homemade dishes and recipes after the delivery of food. It will convey positive messages of having adequate food supplies and carefree lives and help ease residents' anxiety.

► Case:

In a community's online purchasing group in Wuhan, one mom said that her child needed sugar to go with milk, but it was not on the order list. Upon hearing this the group purchasing organizer contacted suppliers and supermarkets and found out that sugar was currently out of stock. Therefore, the organizer asked if any group member could share with her. Soon enough, several members expressed their willingness to share. Then members conducted a contact-free delivery under a tree in the community garden as arranged in the group. Through the friendliness and mutual support of community residents, such a strategy not only encouraged the sharing of food, but relieved the loneliness brought about by isolation.

VI. Safe Food Distribution Procedure

Organizers should plan the food distribution procedure before delivery. Factors that should be considered include the planning and management of venues, distribution staff allocation, on-site distribution procedures and management, notes for residents regarding pre- and after- food pick-ups. A good distribution procedure is critical for community collective purchasing and should be highlighted to prevent any gathering of people during the period of distribution which would lead to an unnecessary risk of infection.

General principle	Contact-free delivery at a safe distance.
Collective distribution	To reduce the risk from gathering, partitioned management should be implemented. Sections may include a temporary food storage section, a pick-up section and a waiting section.
Venue selection	Distribution venues should be outdoor, well ventilated and spacious with good hygienic conditions for temporary food storage and enough space to allow sectioned storage of goods.
Venue management	Follow the principle of partitioned management by allocating specific personnel as callers, distributors and commodity pickers in designated sections, to reduce gatherings and make deliveries contact-free.
Staff allocation	After confirming the total number of orders with suppliers, evaluate the procedure and staff for unloading goods, disinfection and distribution based on the number and total weight of goods to ensure adequate manpower. Inadequate manpower will result in long unloading and distribution times, which may cause food spoilage.
Information on procedure	Once the on-site distribution and pick-up procedures are decided on, organizers should ensure that all participants are well informed of them.
Transportation preparation	If the community covers a large area, hygienic transportation vehicles, e.g. disinfected trolleys, electro-tricycles or tennis carts, could be used within the community to deliver goods to pick-up points in front of residential areas.

VI. Safe Food Distribution Procedure

► Case: Contact free delivery procedure of group food purchases in a Wuhan community

1. Before distribution, organizers of a community collective management of food purchases must have finished partitioning the distribution areas.

- Venue selection. Distribution venues should be outdoor, well ventilated and spacious with good hygienic condition for temporary food storage and enough space to allow sectioned storage of goods.
 - Venue management. Follow the principle of partitioned management by allocating specific personnel as callers, distributors and commodity pickers in designated sections, to reduce gatherings and make deliveries contact-free.
 - Section arrangement. The distribution venue could be divided into the following sections:
 - Temporary food storage section: spacious enough to allow sectioned storage of goods.
 - Food pickup section: keep 2 meters apart from other sections.
 - Waiting-to-be-called section: keep 2 meters apart from other sections.
 - Buffer section for emergencies: designated for residents who arrive before being called or when the waiting section is too crowded.
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2. Allocation of distribution personnel. Details of the allocation are as follows:

- Field director (1). Duties: implement and operate the supply distribution plan and act as a part-time caller in social groups.
- Unloading and placing personnel (the number of staff is based on the total quantity and weight of group purchased goods, but at least 2 people are required; they can leave after the work is done.) Duties: upon arrival, unload and deliver the goods to the designated temporary storage sections and place them onto specific points as instructed by the field director.
- Placing personnel (1-2). Duties: place the goods onto the pickup points based on order categories.
- Disinfecting personnel (1). Duties: disinfect all the delivered goods. After the disinfection, whether he/she should keep participating should depend on the situation.

Note: Every member of the distribution personnel should wear a protective suit of at least general protection level, goggles, N95 mask/respirator, gloves, and if conditions permit, a shoe cover or protective shoes. Everyone should be disinfected as instructed according to individual disinfection procedures.

3. Distribution procedures:

- Unload, check and place all goods in an orderly manner.
- Disinfection: After unloading, checking and orderly placement of all goods, disinfection should be carried out immediately. Residents should never be called out for distribution before disinfection is

VI. Safe Food Distribution Procedure

done. Disinfection should be designated to one specific person.

- Initiate calling: Residents can be called in social groups. A maximum of 10 people could be called each time every 5 to 10 minutes. Those who are not called should not be permitted to leave home in advance. The Field Director as the caller in groups should supervise the procedure to make sure every two persons are kept 2 meters apart.
- After the Field Director calls out the goods a consignee ordered along with their categories, the placing personnel should pack and put the goods onto the pickup point as instructed and leave immediately.
- Once the package is placed on the pickup point, the consignee in the waiting section can check whether the package is consistent with the order. Upon examination, the consignee should raise his/her hand to confirm and leave with the package.
- When the consignee is 2 meters away, the field director can orally call the next person. The person being called should pick up the package as instructed according to the procedure above.

Note: The Field Director or the Caller should prepare the shopping list of everyone in advance. Once a consignee picks up his/her package, notes should be taken to avoid mistakes or omissions. Given that masks may muffle voices, Field Directors could be equipped with an audio amplifier if possible.

4. Precautions for consignees before and after pickup:

- Consignees must wear protective equipment like masks and gloves. Since the pandemic is unpredictable, goggles, shoe covers, and hats are also recommended. If the package is heavy, a consignee could use transportation tools such as trolleys.
- Consignees must go out according to the announced distribution time and calling numbers. Pickup without protective equipment and showing up without calling are strictly forbidden.
- Consignees must take disinfection measures after returning home.

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YANG Jing, a native of Wuhan, Hubei, is an independent sustainable development consultant, and risk assessment and management expert. During the Wuhan lockdown, Yang has provided 18 group purchases for 576 families and 1700 residents in the community in this case. The total weight of purchased food is more than 30,000 tons. No community resident was infected, and the community has been reopened since March 30th, 2020.

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