



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR): Findings from the Program Access Quick Response Survey



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GLOSSARY

ANOVA Significance Test: Analysis of Variance is a statistical method used to assess the differences in means of a numerical variable among three or more groups of a categorical variable. By comparing variation within and between groups, ANOVA helps determine if observed differences are likely due to genuine effects or random chance.

Authorized Representative: An authorized representative is another responsible household member or an adult non-household member designated by the FDPIR applicant for the purpose of applying for the program or for obtaining USDA Foods on behalf of the household.

EBT: Electronic Benefits Transfer.

Elderly: An adult who is 60 years of age and older.

FDPIR: Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations.

FNS: Food and Nutrition Service.

FY: Fiscal year. The Federal fiscal year is October 1–September 30.

Homebound: An individual with a condition due to an illness or injury that limits their ability to leave home without help from another person or use of crutches, a cane, a wheelchair, or a walker. This also includes individuals who should not leave home because of a medical condition or if leaving home requires a considerable and taxing effort.

ITO: Indian Tribal Organization.

Pearson Chi-Square Significance Test: A statistical method used to assess the association between categorical variables. It compares observed and expected distributions, indicating whether the variables are independent or if a significant relationship exists. This test was not used in any analyses where the observed values in the distributions were less than five.

SNAP: Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

Tailgate: A tailgate distribution (mobile distribution) is a mobile or traveling service site where all functions are performed at the locations where the actual distribution takes place. Instead of participants coming to a distribution center to be qualified and receive their food packages, the distribution center goes to the participants (FNS Handbook 501).

Urbanicity: The degree to which an area exhibits characteristics of urban life, including population density, infrastructure, economic activity, and cultural dynamics.

USDA: United States Department of Agriculture

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) provides USDA foods to income-eligible households living on Indian reservations and to Native American households residing in designated areas near reservations or in Oklahoma. This supplemental food program is a vital resource for many households, providing monthly food packages and nutrition education to reduce food insecurity and support a nutritious diet. In the Joint Explanatory Statement of the Further Consolidated Appropriations Bill of 2020, the US Congress required USDA “to conduct a study on the challenges that the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations...face in reaching under served populations”, particularly the homebound and elderly.^{1,2} This report presents findings from a survey of FDPIR administering agencies. The survey covered the following topics: agency characteristics; program outreach approaches; options for participants to apply for FDPIR; food distribution options; challenges with outreach, application processes, and food distribution; COVID-19-related changes in program operations and practices; and staff recommendations for improving program access and use among homebound/elderly individuals.

In 2023, there were a total of 115 FDPIR administering agencies, with 95 responding to the survey. The survey results were analyzed by program size: small (46 percent, ≤200 participants), medium (33 percent, 200-500), and large (21 percent, >500). They were also analyzed by FNS region, with most in the Midwest, Mountain Plains, Southwest, or Western regions.³ For outreach to homebound/elderly participants, 60 percent of agencies used information booths and/or social media; 59 percent coordinated with Tribal health services and/or used brochures. Application options provided by agencies included in-person (83 percent), authorized representative (79 percent), telephone (74 percent), and mail-in and/or email applications (52 percent). Food selection methods were by phone (88 percent), representative (74 percent), repeat orders (71 percent), or printed forms (61 percent). The primary distribution methods were warehouse and representative pickup (89 percent each), and home delivery (86 percent). Resource-wise, 73 percent of agencies could fully support home delivery, though large programs and certain regions reported resource shortages. Challenges in reaching homebound/elderly included increased SNAP participation, unawareness of FDPIR benefits, and transportation issues. Administrative challenges involved limited staff (44 percent) and operational constraints (39 percent). Over 70 percent of agencies saw a participation drop since COVID-19 began in March 2020, mainly due to shifts to SNAP (89 percent) or other pandemic aids (67 percent). Agencies suggested improvements like diversifying and enhancing food options, increasing home-delivery funding, staffing, and outreach, offering more self-determination contracts, and easing eligibility and certification processes.

¹ Joint Explanatory Statement of the Further Consolidated Appropriations Bill of 2020. Congressional Record – Senate. (2019). S6183. Retrieved from <https://www.congress.gov/116/crec/2019/10/28/CREC-2019-10-28-pt1-PgS6179-7.pdf>.

² The survey defined “homebound” as having a condition due to an illness or injury that limits their ability to leave home without help from another person or use of crutches, a cane, a wheelchair, or a walker, including participants that should not leave home because of a medical condition or if leaving home requires a considerable and taxing effort. “Elderly” was defined as participants 60 years of age and older.

³ References to geographic regions reflect FNS regions. Only five agencies were located in either the Northeast or Southeast regions and so these were combined into one category for this report. There were no FDPIR agencies located in the seventh FNS region (Mid-Atlantic) and so that category was not included in these analyses.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Background on FDPIR

The Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR), established in 1977⁴, provides USDA Foods to income-eligible households living on Indian reservations and to Native American households residing in designated areas near reservations or in Oklahoma.⁵ It is a supplemental nutrition program that addresses food insecurity by providing monthly food packages to help maintain a nutritious diet. The food package includes over 100 products, including fruits and vegetables, frozen meats, dairy products, whole grains, legumes, and traditional foods, such as bison, blue cornmeal, wild salmon, catfish, and traditionally harvested wild rice, which may be sourced from Tribally-owned vendors.⁶ The FDPIR food package is reviewed on an ongoing basis to better meet the nutritional needs and food preferences of program participants.⁷

FDPIR was originally designed to be an alternative program to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and to ensure that Native American households with limited access to SNAP offices or authorized stores could receive food assistance. There is a statutory prohibition on participating in both programs within the same month, but eligible households are free to switch between the programs on a monthly basis, as needed or desired.

The USDA Food and Nutrition Service administers FDPIR at the Federal level, with local administration handled by Indian Tribal Organizations or State agencies.⁵ Approximately 280 Tribes currently participate in FDPIR through either ITOs or State agencies. The administering agencies store and distribute food to participants via various methods, including central distribution sites, "tailgate" sites (mobile distribution sites) in remote areas, grocery-store-like locations within communities, and home delivery. Administering agencies also offer nutrition education to participants.

In FY 2018, an average of 87,000 individuals participated in FDPIR per month.⁸ The most recent data indicate that this number dropped to just 49,000 in FY 2023. Participant demographics have changed as well. Compared to the 1990 demographic profile of FDPIR participants,⁹ the nationally representative study of FDPIR in 2016 found that participation by elderly adults increased over time while children's participation declined.¹⁰ The 2016 study found that access to FDPIR distribution sites varied in terms of distance traveled and the means of transportation used by program participants, with the elderly and those living in more remote areas facing the greatest burden.

⁴Food Stamp Act of 1977 (Public Law [P.L.] 95–113)

⁵U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service. (2018). FDPIR Fact Sheet. Retrieved from <https://www.fns.usda.gov/fdpir/fdpir-fact-sheet>

⁶ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service. (Revised August 2023). USDA Foods Available List for Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR). Retrieved from <https://www.fns.usda.gov/fdpir/usda-foods-available-list>

⁷ Information about the FDPIR Food Package Review Work Group is available at <https://www.fns.usda.gov/fdpir/fdpir-food-package-review-work-group>

⁸U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service. (October 2023). FDPIR Participation. Retrieved from: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/food-distribution-program-tables>

⁹ Usher, Charles L., David S. Shanklin, and Judith B. Wildfire. 1990. "Evaluation of the Food Distribution Program on Indian reservations." Alexandria, VA: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Analysis and Evaluation.

¹⁰ Pindus, NM., Hafford, C., Levy, DK., et al. (2016). Study of the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR): Final Report. Retrieved from: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/fdpir/study-fdpir-8>.

Congressional Directive and Impetus for this Study

The United States Congress required USDA "to conduct a study on the challenges that the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations, and other food distribution programs administered by the Secretary, face in reaching underserved populations" with "an emphasis on the homebound and elderly, to better capture data on the population of people unable to physically travel to a distribution location."¹ In response to the Congressional directive, FNS designed this study to improve understanding of the various barriers that eligible populations face in obtaining FDPIR benefits and the extent to which these populations are not reached as a result. While the 2016 FDPIR study results showed participant satisfaction with FDPIR to be high (94 percent), it also revealed several challenges. About a fifth of participants found it challenging to travel to the FDPIR site to pick up their food packages.¹⁰ It remains unclear what barriers authorized representatives face when acting on behalf of program participants. In keeping with the intent of Congress, this study focused on obtaining the perspectives of FDPIR administering agencies, challenges in reaching underserved individuals who are eligible for FDPIR (namely homebound and elderly individuals), strategies and flexibilities employed by agencies in reaching the underserved, and recommendations for program improvement.

Study Objectives

- 1** Determine and describe the challenges that prevent ITOs or State agencies from reaching homebound or elderly individuals, including FDPIR program requirements and resources or operational and financial considerations at the Tribal, State and local levels.
- 2** Identify, describe, and categorize the strategies and flexibilities used to distribute food to underserved populations eligible for FDPIR, specifically homebound and elderly individuals.
- 3** Gather and summarize recommendations from ITOs or State agencies on how to increase food access for homebound and elderly individuals eligible for FDPIR.

Study Methodology

The study team conducted a web-based survey of all 115 FDPIR program operators from ITOs and State agencies over eight weeks. The survey was developed in collaboration with FNS. The study team hosted a webinar with FDPIR staff to review the study objectives and benefits of participation, share information, and address questions. Cognitive interviews were conducted with six program operators (whose programs varied by size, FNS region³, and urbanicity) to assess their comprehension of survey items, ability to provide the requested information, and general usability of the survey instrument. OMB approval was received in March 2023. The study team conducted the survey between May to July 2023. Once launched, regular email reminders were sent to non-respondents, and phone follow-ups were conducted during the last three weeks. Over 80 percent of FDPIR program operators completed the survey. No non-response bias analysis or weighting adjustment was required as item response rates were high.

For the analyses, Pearson Chi-Square tests were used to examine the relationship between categorical variables, ensuring robust and reliable statistical evaluation. ANOVA (Analysis of Variance) was used for continuous variables to compare the means across different groups and to ascertain if any statistically significant differences existed.

It's important to note that we did not run Chi-Square tests on categorical variables with any groups having fewer than five observations. This decision was based on statistical best practices, as small group sizes can lead to unreliable and inaccurate results in Chi-Square tests. This approach ensures the integrity and accuracy of our statistical analysis, maintaining the highest standards in our research methodology. Please see Appendix A for more details on the study methodology.

CHAPTER 2. FDPIR PROGRAM CHARACTERISTICS

Agency Characteristics

In 2023, there were a total of 115 FDPIR administering agencies. Of these, 95 agencies (83 percent) responded to the survey. These agencies vary in size, location, resources, and capacity, which can impact FDPIR administration. These factors are important to consider when analyzing the effectiveness of FDPIR because strategies and challenges could differ for agencies with diverse characteristics. The final sample included responses from all regions and program sizes.

This section details the characteristics of FDPIR administering agencies, particularly their program size and FNS region (Table 2-1 and Table 2-2). FNS shared 2023 monthly participation numbers with the research team to compare the entire population of FDPIR agencies with the 83 percent of agencies who responded to this survey. Findings from the survey were analyzed by classifying agencies by FDPIR participation rate into small, medium, and large programs. We classified agencies serving 200 participants or fewer as "small" programs, grouped those serving between 200 and 500 participants as "medium," and identified agencies serving more than 500 participants as "large". Less than half of FDPIR agencies were small (46 percent), about a third were medium-sized (33 percent), and the remaining were large (21 percent). The survey results were also analyzed by region. Each FDPIR agency was associated with one of six FNS-designated regions based on their location. Most agencies were in either the Midwest, Mountain Plains, Southwest, or Western regions, with about 20 to 25 percent of agencies in each. For analytical purposes and to respect respondent confidentiality, the five agencies located in the Northeast and Southeast regions were combined into one category for this report.

Table 2-1. FDPIR Agency Characteristics, by Program Size

Characteristics	Count of Total (%)	Count of Survey Respondents (%)
Small	55 (48)	44 (46)
Medium	38 (33)	31 (32)
Large	22 (19)	20 (21)
Overall	115 (100)	95 (100)

Note: For more information, see Appendix C, Exhibit C-1.
Source: 2023 FNS Administrative Data.

Table 2-2. FDPIR Agency Characteristics, by Region

Characteristics	Count of Total (%)	Count of Survey Respondents (%)
Midwest	23 (20)	17 (18)
Mountain Plains	29 (25)	27 (28)
Northeast/Southeast	5 (4)	5 (5)
Southwest	29 (25)	26 (27)
Western	29 (25)	20 (21)
Overall	115 (100)	95 (100)

Note: For more information, see Appendix C, Exhibit C-2.
Source: 2023 FNS Administrative Data.

The distribution of program sizes differed across FNS regions (Table 2-3). Medium and large programs were primarily in the Mountain Plains or Southwest.

Table 2-3. FDPIR Agency Location, by Program Size

Characteristics	Small (%)	Medium (%)	Large (%)
Midwest	13 (76)	3 (18)	1 (6)
Mountain Plains	8 (30)	13 (48)	6 (22)
Northeast/Southeast	3 (60)	0 (0)	2 (40)
Southwest	7 (27)	10 (38)	9 (35)
Western	13 (65)	5 (25)	2 (10)
Overall	44 (46)	31 (33)	20 (21)

Note: For more information, see Appendix C, Exhibit C-4.

Source: 2023 FNS Administrative Data.

The majority of FDPIR staff who filled out the survey listed their position in their agency as either "director" or "manager" (85 percent). Smaller percentages were supervisors (7 percent) or coordinators/specialists (4 percent). To maintain brevity and clarity, respondents who completed the survey on behalf of their agency will be referred to as "program operators" throughout this report since they are all central to their agencies' operations regardless of job title. Forty-six (46) percent of program operators had been employed by FDPIR agencies for five years or less, while the average tenure with the program was approximately 13.5 years. See Exhibit C-5, Exhibit C-6, and Exhibit C-7 in Appendix C for more details.

The average size of the FDPIR agency distribution area was 2,040 square miles (Table 2-4 and Table 2-5). Small and medium-sized programs and agencies located in the Northeast, Southeast, and Western regions had, on average, a smaller coverage area. For more details, refer to Exhibit C-8 and Exhibit C-9 in Appendix C.

Table 2-4. FDPIR Distribution Area (Square Miles), by Program Size

Characteristics	Mean	Minimum	Maximum
Small	1,439	13	18,600
Medium	1,212	30	7,500
Large	4,878	53	16,529
Overall	2,040	13	18,600

Note: For more information, see Appendix C, Exhibit C-5.

Source: 2023 FDPIR Program Access Survey, question 3.

Table 2-5. FDPIR Distribution Area (Square Miles), by Region

Characteristics	Mean	Minimum	Maximum
Midwest	2,679	30	18,600
Mountain Plains	2,518	20	12,340
Northeast/Southeast	505	13	2,360
Southwest	2,610	39	16,529
Western	507	22	3,000
Overall	2,040	13	18,600

Note: For more information, see Appendix C, Exhibit C-5.

Source: 2023 FDPIR Program Access Survey, question 3.

In terms of staff size, smaller programs employed three (3) full-time staff on average, while larger programs had seventeen (17) full-time staff. Part-time staff employment across agencies showed less variation by program size. For more details, refer to Exhibit C-10 and Exhibit C-11 in Appendix C.

Food Distribution Options and Access

FDPIR agencies provide participants with five (5) different food distribution options: warehouse pickup, authorized representative pickup, home delivery, store model pickup, and tailgate (mobile distribution) site pickup. Across all program sizes and regions, most agencies offered warehouse pickup (89 percent), authorized representative pickup (89 percent), and home delivery (86 percent) as options for participants to receive their FDPIR food packages. The availability of remaining distribution options varied among FDPIR agencies based on program size and region (Table 2-6 and Table 2-7). Agencies with small-sized programs and those in the Western region rarely had store model pickup options. In contrast, most agencies in the Northeast/Southeast and Southwest regions did offer this option.

Table 2-6. Food Distribution Options Offered by FDPIR Agencies, by Program Size

Characteristics	Small (%)	Medium (%)	Large (%)	Overall (%)
Warehouse Pickup	91	90	85	89
Authorized Representative	79	97	100	89
Home Delivery	86	94	75	86
Store Model Pickup	26	29	55	33
Tailgate (Mobile Distribution) Site Pickup	16	36	50	30

Note: For more information, see Appendix C, Exhibit C-12.

Source: 2023 FDPIR Program Access Survey, question 4.

Table 2-7. Food Distribution Options Offered by FDPIR Agencies, by Region

Characteristics	Midwest (%)	Mountain Plains (%)	Northeast/Southeast (%)	Southwest (%)	Western (%)	Overall (%)
Warehouse Pickup	82	100	80	77	100	89
Authorized Representative	77	96	100	96	79	89
Home Delivery	94	74	100	92	84	86
Store Model Pickup	29	19	60	65	5	33
Tailgate (Mobile) Site Pickup	12	26	40	31	47	30

Note: For more information, see Appendix C, Exhibit C-13.

Source: 2023 FDPIR Program Access Survey, question 4.

Most agencies had a limited number of pickup locations. On average, each agency had approximately 1.3 warehouse sites, 2.5 store models, and 5.2 tailgate (mobile distribution) sites. The variations in these numbers based on program size and region were minimal and inconsistent (refer to Exhibit C-14 and Exhibit C-15 in Appendix C for more information).

Agencies with warehouse or store model pickup locations generally maintained a weekly schedule with at least five open days. However, agencies offering tailgate (mobile) pickup models opened these sites only a few days each month. Despite slight variations, no clear pattern emerged based on program size and region. (see Exhibit C-16 in Appendix C for additional details).

CHAPTER 3. STRATEGIES USED TO REACH HOMEBOUND AND ELDERLY

The survey also explored the strategies used by FDPIR agencies to distribute food to individuals who cannot collect their food packages from a centralized location. Outreach and service logistics for vulnerable populations can be complex, requiring innovative approaches to ensure participants can access benefits. This section examines the distribution options used by homebound and elderly participants, agency strategies for meeting their needs, and differences by agency characteristics.

Homebound and Elderly Participants

Most of the remaining survey questions focused on homebound and elderly FDPIR participants rather than the general population. Program operators were given specific definitions of these terms to consider when answering the questions. Homebound was defined as having "a condition due to an illness or injury that limits their ability to leave home without help from another person or use of crutches, a cane, a wheelchair, or a walker" and also included any individuals "that should not leave home because of a medical condition or if leaving home requires a considerable and taxing effort." Elderly was defined as "60 years of age and older."

After defining the terms, the survey inquired about the number of homebound and elderly participants served by program operators. On average, each agency served about 139 individuals meeting one or both of these definitions, but this varied substantially by program size (Table 3-1 and Table 3-2). Larger programs generally served a higher count of homebound/elderly participants. Regional differences identified also can be linked to variations in program sizes. Specifically, regions with a greater proportion of smaller programs tended to have fewer homebound/elderly participants served. This aligns with the expectation that larger programs, serving more participants overall, would likely have a higher number of homebound/elderly individuals. The consistent percentages in Table 3-1 and Table 3-2 further highlight that the number of homebound and elderly participants relative to all FDPIR participants served per agency was similar across program sizes.

Table 3-1. Homebound and Elderly Participants Per FDPIR Agency, by Program Size

Characteristics	Mean	Percentage
Small	36	42
Medium	81	27
Large	469	30
Overall	139	34

Note: For more information, see Appendix C, Exhibit C-17.
Source: 2023 FDPIR Program Access Survey, question 8.

Table 3-2. Homebound and Elderly Participants Per FDPIR Agency, by Region

Characteristics	Mean	Percentage
Midwest	44	41
Mountain Plains	166	32
Northeast/Southeast	48	30
Southwest	270	34
Western	48	33
Overall	139	34

Note: For more information, see Appendix C, Exhibit C-18.

Source: 2023 FDPIR Program Access Survey, question 8.

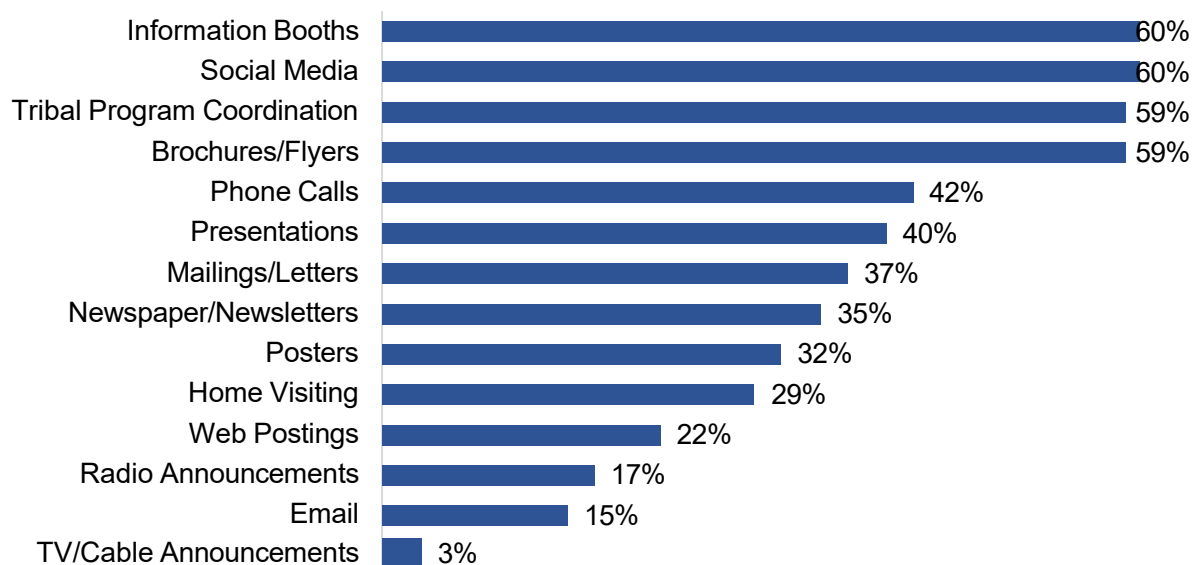
Overall, FDPIR agencies from this survey indicated that 34 percent of the participants they serve are homebound and elderly participants. According to the 2016 FDPIR study, about 42 percent of FDPIR households include adults over the age of 60.¹⁰ While the results from this study are not directly comparable to the previous study due to data collection differences, this reinforces the earlier findings that older adults are a substantial portion of the population served by the FDPIR program.

Service to Homebound and Elderly Participants

The survey asked about various aspects of service to homebound and elderly participants, including outreach to those who were eligible but not participating, enrolling participants, assisting participants in selecting foods in the benefit packages, and arranging for food pickup or delivery. Reaching out to homebound and elderly individuals who are eligible but not currently enrolled in FDPIR can be challenging, and FDPIR agencies employ various strategies to accomplish this (Figure 3-1).

The most common outreach efforts included direct outreach methods of information sharing, such as information booths at events, social media, and brochures/flyers. More than half of FDPIR agencies also coordinated with Tribal health and human services programs for outreach to homebound/elderly individuals who are eligible but not participating in the FDPIR program. Other, less frequently used direct outreach strategies include phone calls and mailings. Notably, only 29 percent use home visiting as an outreach strategy, and this may be an opportunity for FDPIR agencies to coordinate with other elder-serving programs using this method.

Figure 3-1. Types of Outreach Conducted with Homebound/Elderly Individuals

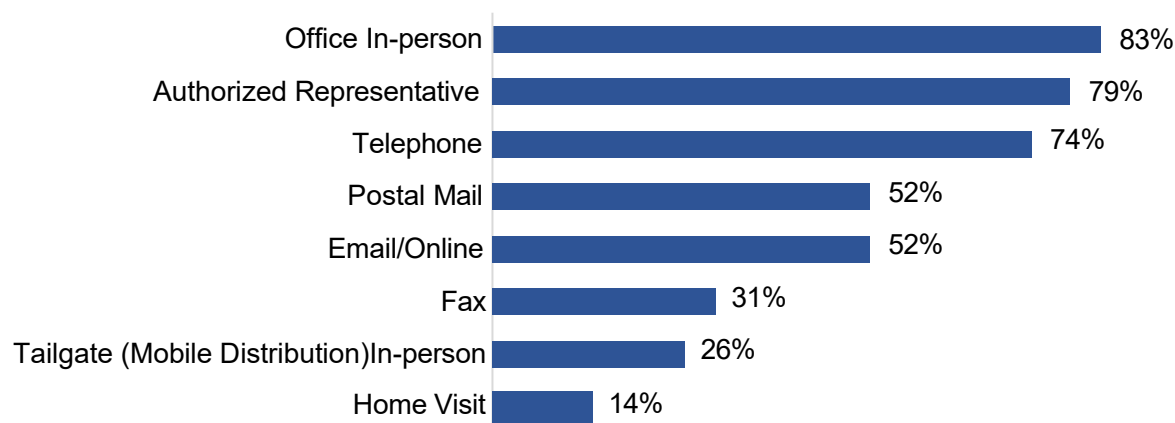


Note: For more information, see Appendix C, Exhibit C-19 and Exhibit C-20.

Source: 2023 FDPIR Program Access Survey, question 15.

Homebound/elderly participants in FDPIR can apply for benefits in a variety of ways. Figure 3-2 shows the application options offered by FDPIR agencies, listed in order of popularity. The most common options include applying in person at agency offices, using an authorized representative, and applying over the phone. About half of the agencies also accept mail-in and email/online applications. Use of these options remained consistent across agencies, regardless of program size or region.

Figure 3-2. Applications Options Offered by FDPIR Agencies



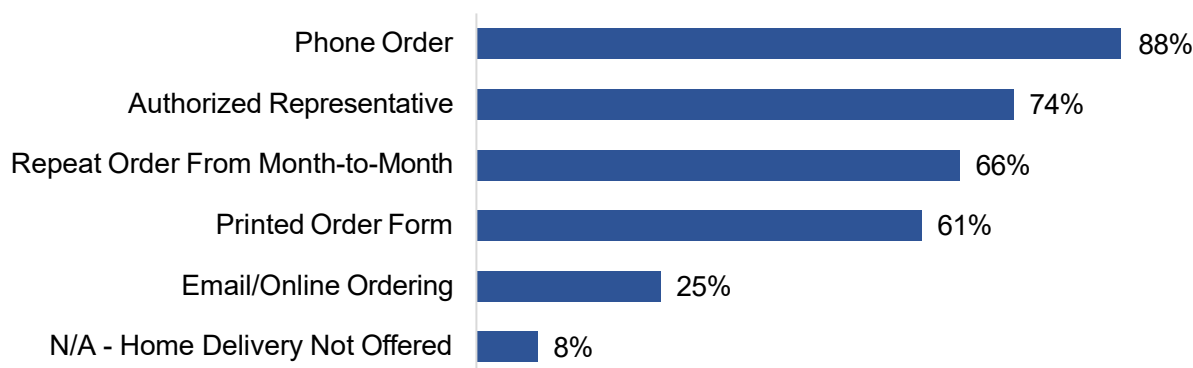
Note: For more information, see Appendix C, Exhibit C-21 and Exhibit C-22.

Source: 2023 FDPIR Program Access Survey, question 9.

FDPIR agencies offer various methods by which participants who receive home delivery can select their food benefits (Figure 3-3). A majority of FDPIR agencies use all methods except email/online, and the most popular way to order food is by phone. These trends were generally consistent across

program size and region, with the exception that fewer agencies in the Mountain Plains region had a home delivery option. Typically, authorized representatives made food selections on behalf of participants from agencies offering home delivery. This aligns with earlier findings that a higher percentage of Mountain Plains agencies distribute benefits through authorized representatives and have a lower home delivery rate. Despite this difference, most agencies in this region still provide options for home delivery and food selection, albeit at a lower rate than other regions.

Figure 3-3. Food Selection Options for Home Delivery Offered by FDPIR Agencies



Note: For more information, see Appendix C, Exhibit C-23 and Exhibit C-24.

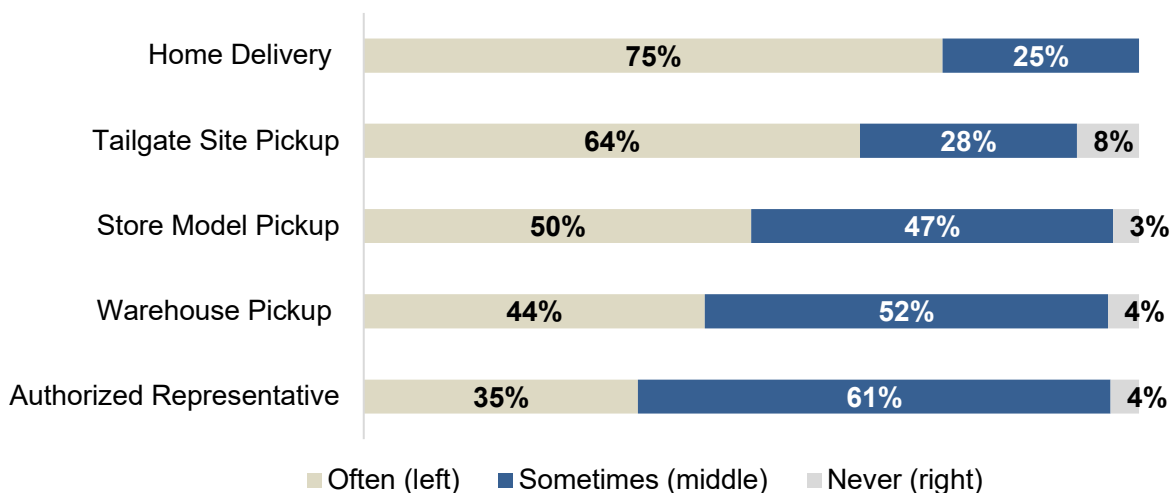
Source: 2023 FDPIR Program Access Survey, question 10.

Homebound and elderly participants most often receive their FDPIR food packages via home delivery, which is used "often" in 75 percent of FDPIR agencies (Figure 3-4). The next two most common options were tailgate (mobile distribution) site pickup (used by homebound/elderly participants "often" in 64 percent of agencies) and store model pickup (50 percent). Notably, these two distribution options were the least commonly offered overall (see Table 2-6 and Table 2-7 above and/or Exhibit C-12 and Exhibit C-13 in Appendix C).

There are a few different possibilities for this divergence. This finding could indicate that tailgate (mobile distribution) and store model pickups may be essential for homebound and elderly participants. Therefore, agencies lacking these options could benefit from allocating resources to establish such locations. However, as discussed above, fewer small- and medium-sized programs had these options compared to larger programs. Potentially, this could indicate that these options are less needed by agencies with smaller service areas.

An important area for future research is determining whether these options would be appropriate or desirable for some agencies based on characteristics such as size. Another aspect to investigate further is conducting a cost analysis comparing home delivery with tailgate (mobile distribution) and store model pickups, as homebound and elderly participants frequently utilize these options. Each of these options requires significant investments of time and resources by the agency and the Tribal leadership. Gaining deeper insights into the needs, costs, and benefits linked to distribution methods for delivering food to participants could inform program funding decisions, particularly concerning staffing and equipment.

Figure 3-4. Distribution Options Used by Homebound/Elderly Participants

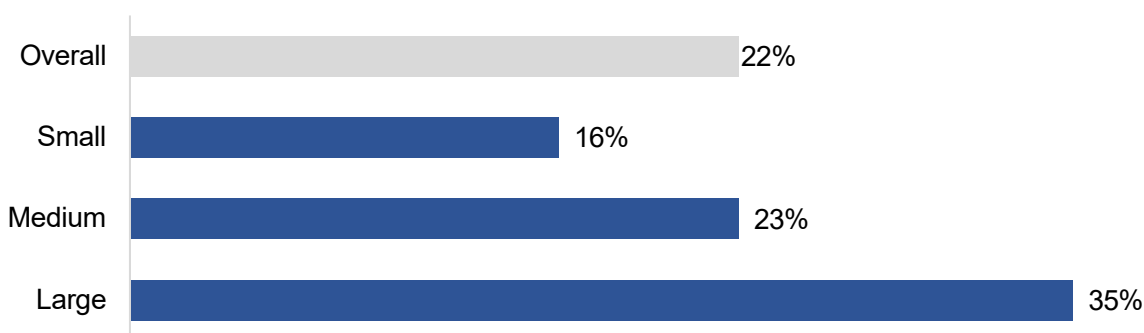


Note: For more information, see Appendix C, Exhibit C-26 through C-34.
Source: 2023 FDPIR Program Access Survey, question 13.

FDPIR Program Requirements and Resources

About 22 percent of agencies reported being unable to provide home delivery to all participants who desired it due to insufficient staff and resources (Figure 3-5). These results varied by program size. Thirty-five (35) percent of large-sized programs noted difficulty providing this service, compared to just 16 percent of small programs. The survey also asked program operators of these agencies about the primary reasons for this constraint. Out of those who responded, about two-thirds mentioned needing additional personnel (such as drivers and warehouse workers), whereas about one-third noted requirements for more vehicles (particularly ones with storage space, coolers, and adequate insurance coverage). See Exhibit C-39 in Appendix C for more details.

Figure 3-5. Percentage of ITOs Reporting Insufficient Staff and Resources to Offer Home Delivery



Note: For more information, see Appendix C, Exhibit C-37 and Exhibit C-38.
Source: 2023 FDPIR Program Access Survey, question 14.

CHAPTER 4. CHALLENGES IN REACHING HOMEBOUND AND ELDERLY

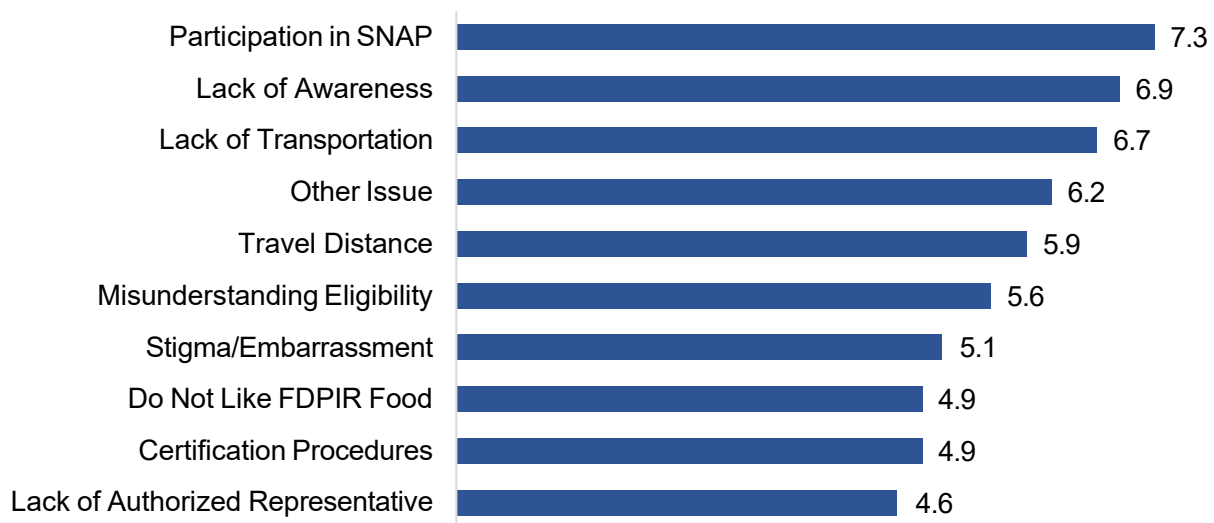
Many FDPIR administering agencies face substantial challenges with reaching homebound and elderly individuals. These challenges can be attributed to participant-level issues (e.g., lack of awareness or misunderstanding of program requirements) or program-level issues (e.g., policy limitations, staffing shortages). This section discusses how these issues can contribute to challenges in reaching homebound and elderly individuals.

When asked whether their agency had "experienced any challenges reaching homebound and/or elderly individuals who are eligible but not participating in FDPIR," 40 percent of program operators said yes. Those representing agencies with large-sized programs were slightly more likely to say so, with 50 percent reporting challenges. Variations by region were minor. See Exhibit C-40 and Exhibit C-41 in Appendix C for a full breakdown of responses by program size and region.

The survey then asked program operators to rank a list of nine potential challenges in reaching homebound/elderly individuals who are eligible but not participating in FDPIR (see Figure 4-1). They could also write in any challenges not included in the list (option 10). A rank of "1" was the least challenging, and "10" was the most challenging. Therefore, the numbers for these items represent the average ranking score. Higher scores indicate that the listed issue was more challenging. The highest-ranked challenges overall included participation in SNAP instead of FDPIR, lack of awareness about the program, and lack of transportation. Across all program sizes and regions, program operators consistently ranked these three challenges high. Agencies with larger-sized programs and those in the Midwest and Mountain Plains regions also ranked travel distance to FDPIR distribution locations high.

The survey then asked program operators to explain how the three issues they ranked highest were challenging for their agency. About 61 percent mentioned issues with switching from SNAP to FDPIR. Many eligible individuals hesitate to switch from SNAP to FDPIR for various reasons relating to personal preference, while some struggle with canceling their SNAP benefits despite preferring FDPIR. Some also mentioned difficulties with the FDPIR certification/application process and found the program requirements burdensome or intrusive. Other challenges included misunderstandings about program benefits and eligibility and negative perceptions about the food provided in the program. See Exhibit C-44 in Appendix C for more details on the various themes identified from respondents' explanations of these challenges.

Figure 4-1. Average Ranking of Challenges Reaching Homebound/Elderly Not Currently Participating in FDPIR



Note: For more information, see Appendix C, Exhibit C-42 and Exhibit C-43.
Source: 2023 FDPIR Program Access Survey, question 17.

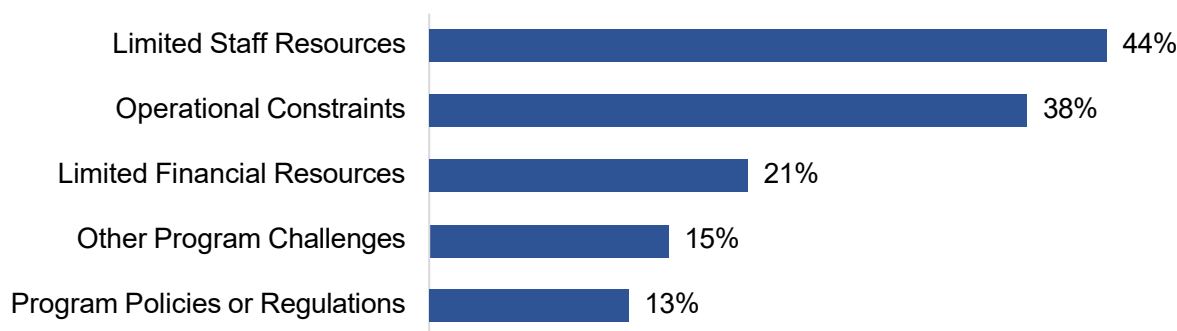
The survey also asked about program-related challenges that agencies experience, such as limited staff resources, operational constraints, limited financial resources, or program policies/regulations. Program operators also reported some program-related challenges that were not listed (Figure 4-2). They reported limited staff (44 percent) and operational constraints (39 percent) as the most challenging issues overall. Twenty-one percent selected "limited financial resources." Fifteen (15) percent or fewer selected "program policies or regulations" or wrote in another challenge.

These percentages were consistent across the different program sizes but varied by region. For example, higher percentages of agencies in the Mountain Plains, Northeast/Southeast, and Western regions experienced limited staff resources and operational constraints as challenging compared to agencies in the Midwest and Southwest regions. One in four Mountain Plains agencies noted challenges with program policies and regulations, which was higher than any other region (notably, no agencies in the Midwest or Northeast/Southeast regions stated this as a challenge). See Exhibit C-45 and Exhibit C-46 in Appendix C for a full breakdown of responses by program size and region.

The survey included follow-up questions inviting program operators to detail their agencies' challenges. They explained that many of these challenges revolved around insufficient staffing, which limits activities such as home delivery services, basic service availability, attending outreach events, and traveling to communities. Utilizing existing staff for these tasks would disrupt warehouse operations due to their time-consuming nature, which can occupy entire days.

Program operators also mentioned limited financial resources and program/policy regulations as additional obstacles. They described how financial limitations prevent them from hiring more staff, conducting outreach and community education efforts, and acquiring necessary resources for home delivery (e.g., vehicles). While outreach is crucial for raising awareness and dispelling misconceptions, they often could not prioritize it due to staffing and resource limitations. Some respondents noted policy-related hurdles, such as eligibility restrictions which prevent individuals from participating in FDPIR. See Exhibit C-47 through C-51 in Appendix C for more details on the various themes in respondents' explanations of these challenges.

Figure 4-2. Program-Related Challenges with Outreach Efforts

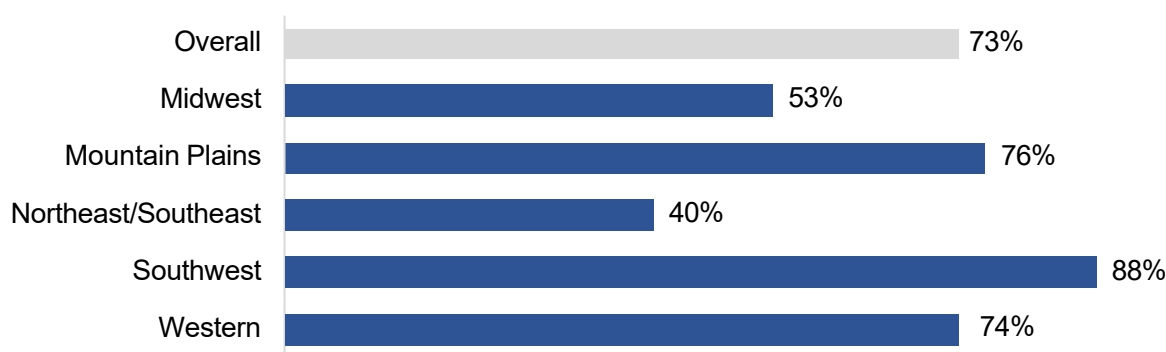


Note: For more information, see Appendix C, Exhibit C-45 and Exhibit C-46.
Source: 2023 FDPIR Program Access Survey, question 19.

CHAPTER 5. IMPACT OF COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic posed additional challenges in reaching FDPIR participants. Across agencies, more than 70 percent of program operators stated that FDPIR participation among homebound and elderly individuals decreased during this time. There were minor and inconsistent variations by program size. However, declining participation varied more by FNS region (Figure 5-1). Eighty-eight (88) percent of agencies in the Southwest region experienced a decline, and those in the Mountain Plains (76 percent) and Western (74 percent) regions had a similar drop. In contrast, participation declined in just over half of the agencies in the Midwest region and only 40 percent in the Northeast/Southeast. See Exhibit C-52 and Exhibit C-53 in Appendix C for a full breakdown of responses by program size and region.

Figure 5-1. Pandemic-Related FDPIR Participation Drop among Homebound/Elderly



Note: For more information, see Appendix C, Exhibit C-52, and Exhibit C-53.
Source: 2023 FDPIR Program Access Survey, question 23.

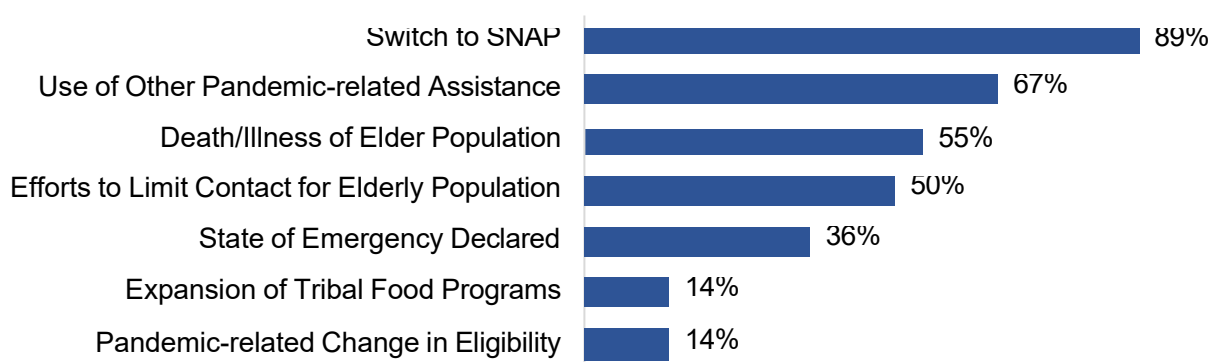
The program operators who stated that their agency had experienced a decline were asked a follow-up question about the reasons for the drop among homebound/elderly individuals. Figure 5-2 lists several factors that contributed to this decline in order of popularity. Many participants switched to SNAP or an alternative pandemic-related assistance program. Tragically, cases of death and illness among older adults also drove part of the drop. Nearly half of the survey respondents indicated that

agencies' efforts limiting contact to protect vulnerable populations also contributed to a decrease in participation.

An important area for future research is understanding how agencies have continued to adjust as COVID numbers drop and the state of emergency declaration expires. Important questions include:

- Have programs reverted to increased contact with participants?
- What have households who switched to alternative pandemic-related programs done since/if those programs have ended?

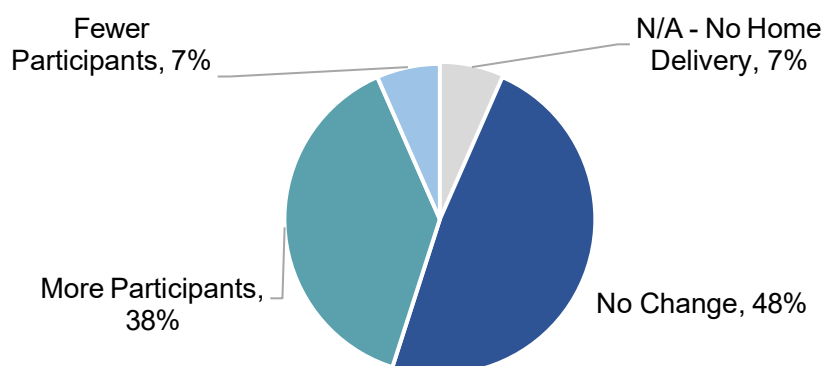
Figure 5-2. Top Reasons for Participation Decline Among Homebound/Elderly During COVID Pandemic



Note: For more information, see Appendix C, Exhibit C-54 and Exhibit C-55.
Source: 2023 FDPIR Program Access Survey, question 24.

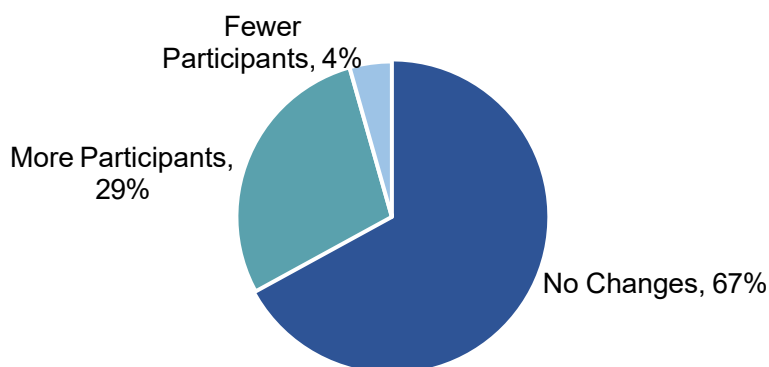
Many agencies experienced an increase in participants using home delivery (38 percent) and/or authorized representatives (29 percent) to pick up their FDPIR food packages (Figure 5-3 and Figure 5-4). Less than 10 percent of respondents had fewer participants use either of these options during the pandemic, and about 7 percent did not offer home delivery.

Figure 5-3. Pandemic-Related Change in Home Delivery Usage



Note: For more information, see Appendix C, Exhibit C-56 and Exhibit C-57.
Source: 2023 FDPIR Program Access Survey, question 27.

Figure 5-4. Pandemic-Related Change in Authorized Representative Usage



Note: For more information, see Appendix C, Exhibit C-61 and Exhibit C-62.
Source: 2023 FDPIR Program Access Survey, question 30.

Program operators who noted pandemic-related changes in home delivery were also asked about their future expectations for home delivery and authorized representative usage. A majority of FDPIR agencies across the program size and region said that they expected to maintain their current levels of usage for both distribution options (See Exhibit C-58, Exhibit C-59, Exhibit C-63, and Exhibit C-64 in Appendix C for more details). They also shared the reasons for their expectations. Those who expected to maintain their current level of home delivery services cited the continuing need for such services for homebound and elderly participants and the convenience of this option. Those who expected home delivery to decrease cited the declining influence of pandemic-related concerns and the lack of resources (especially vehicle availability). Similarly, many expected a decline in authorized representative usage as clients (especially younger able-bodied clients) resume warehouse pickups themselves. Some mentioned that they would be limiting this option to older adults who cannot leave their homes. See Exhibit C-60 and Exhibit C-65 in Appendix C for more details on the themes that emerged in these explanations.

Overall, more than 80 percent of agencies modified their application/certification processes for homebound/elderly participants during the pandemic, and this was consistent across program sizes. However, it did vary by FNS region (Figure 5-5). Ninety-two (92) percent of agencies in the Southwest region modified their processes, as did 89 percent in the Western region. This percentage was lower in the Mountain Plains (80 percent) and Midwest (76 percent) regions. It was lowest in the Northeast/Southeast region, with only 60 percent of agencies stating that they had modified their processes for homebound and elderly participants to apply or certify for FDPIR benefits.

Among the agencies that made these modifications, the most common change was allowing applications and/or certifications to be made over the phone (48 percent). Other changes to the application/certification process that respondents mentioned included setting up the option for online/e-mail (24 percent), drop-off (17 percent), and mail-in (14 percent) applications. See Exhibit C-68 in Appendix C for more details on the various themes generated from respondents' explanations of the administrative modifications their agencies made during the pandemic.

Figure 5-5. COVID-19 Related Modifications of Administrative Processes for Homebound/Elderly Applicants



Note: For more information, see Appendix C, Exhibit C-66 and Exhibit C-67.
Source: 2023 FDPIR Program Access Survey, question 21.

The survey also invited program operators to write in their own words how the pandemic affected their agencies' operations. Several themes emerged from these answers. Forty-six (46) percent noted that a decline in participation prompted changes in agency operations. Thirty-three (33) percent of agencies introduced new pickup/curbside procedures. Fifteen (15) percent had changed all procedures to allow for hygiene and social distancing. A similar proportion experienced a staffing decrease. Program operators also reported home delivery changes (6 percent) and changes in the application process (4 percent). See Exhibit C-69 in Appendix C for more details on the themes in respondents' explanations.

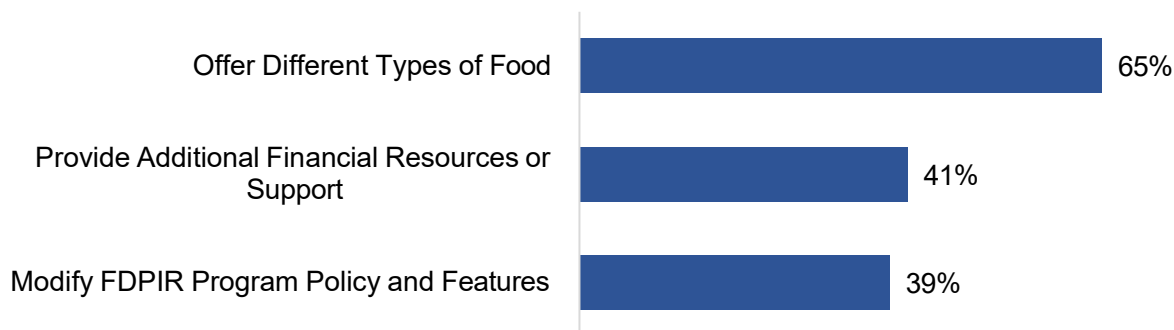
Agencies also proactively adapted their operations in numerous ways to meet the needs of homebound and elderly participants in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The most common adaptation was continuing or increasing deliveries, followed by implementing distancing measures during delivery. Other adaptations included online/phone processes, pickup/curbside systems, and changing hygiene and social distancing procedures. See Exhibit C-70 in Appendix C for more details on the various themes identified from respondents' explanations of the adaptations to their agency operations during the pandemic.

CHAPTER 6. RECOMMENDATIONS FROM FDPIR AGENCIES

While the survey questions covered a broad array of topics, it is crucial to recognize that FDPIR program operators may have additional insights regarding issues and challenges for program access. Therefore, the last few questions invited them to extend any recommendations for improving the FDPIR program. This section describes their responses.

The survey asked if program operators thought changes should be made in certain areas, and they checked off the applicable options from a provided list (Figure 6-1). They then explained their additional recommendations for improving the FDPIR program in their own words. Responses were consistent across various program sizes and regions.

Figure 6-1. Recommendations for Improving Program Access and Use for Homebound and/or Elderly Individuals



Note: For more information, see Appendix C, Exhibit C-71 and Exhibit C-72.
Source: 2023 FDPIR Program Access Survey, question 33.

Recommendation 1: FDPIR Food Options

Overall, 65 percent of program operators said changes to the food provided in FDPIR packages were needed. Many homebound/elderly individuals have chronic health issues necessitating strict dietary requirements. Most cited a need for an increased variety of low-sodium and low-sugar foods. Additionally, foods that come in packaging that are easier to open and consume are more accessible for individuals with health conditions such as arthritis or poor dentition. As one program operator explained:

“Care should be taken to address the nutrition needs of the elderly/homebound by introduction of foods that are in small quantities to provide ease of handling and usage and can be opened with ease as many have difficulties with even minor ADL. Provide options for those who are edentulous or have other dental issues.”

Many also explained that participants often prefer SNAP because there are fewer restrictions on the foods obtained with SNAP benefits. Others recommended offering more traditional local foods through the FDPIR food package so that food purchases could support local farmers. Lastly, many suggested increasing or adding specific items to the food package, including more meats, fresh produce, and spices to cook with.

Almost all FDPIR households, including older adults, had only one or two members. This finding emphasizes the need to offer small packages so that food is not wasted and packages that are easy to open and re-seal. See Exhibit C-73 in Appendix C for more details on the various themes in respondents' recommendations for change.

Recommendation 2: Financial Resources

Overall, 41 percent of program operators mentioned additional financial resources and support are needed to improve program access and use by homebound/elderly individuals. A few areas of need emerged in their recommendations: resources for home delivery (including fuel and vehicles) and staffing to support delivery and outreach. They also discussed the need to broaden their reach in communities served. Other specific recommendations included more self-determination contract awards from the Federal Government (such as those awarded via the FDPIR Self-Determination Demonstration Project, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/fdpir/self-determination>) and increased financial benefits for participants to use for non-food essential items and services such as electrical and

plumbing. They also noted the longstanding impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. As one respondent explained:

“FDPIR is never going to cost what it once did prior to 2020. More staff, more resources, flexible distribution models, more equipment, facility renovations will all be needed today and moving forward in a world affected and changed by a pandemic.”

See Exhibit C-74 in Appendix C for more details on the various themes in respondents' recommendations for change.

Recommendation 3: Program Policy

Overall, 39 percent of program operators recommended changes to FDPIR program policy and features. Several suggestions emerged from their responses, many of which concerned the FDPIR eligibility process. For example, some advised modifying the income thresholds for certification, as the current cutoffs restrict program benefits for people who need them. Some also mentioned how the rigidity of the regulations does not account for individual circumstances. For instance, one program operator explained:

“Many homebound and elderly are caretakers of their grandchildren, nieces, and nephews, with minimal or no other support services. The elderly caretaker is considered an active SNAP household if receiving benefits for their grandchildren only and unable to apply for FDPIR, although they are not receiving SNAP benefits themselves. I believe the adult caretaker should be eligible for FDPIR when receiving SNAP for the young household members only.”

They also gave recommendations on adjusting allowable service areas and expanding their ability to serve non-Native individuals in areas off reservations that had high concentrations of Native Americans.¹¹ Other recommendations included simplifying the certification/recertification processes (such as allowing them to occur over the phone), additional shelter/utility deductions to homebound or disabled elderly individuals to increase participation, and increased resource allotments for home visits/home delivery. See Exhibit C-75 in Appendix C for more details on the various themes in respondents' recommendations for change.

General Recommendations

Other specific recommendations from program operators included ethics training for staff for elder communication, funding for an online platform to apply/certify participants, improving produce quality, increasing food allotments for single-member households, in-home cooking lessons for participants, changing income and delivery guidelines to be more inclusive, and more disability-friendly improvements to warehouses such as ramps. Some recommended tailgating in different community centers to increase their presence outside of delivery. See Exhibit C-76 in Appendix C for more details on the various themes in respondents' final recommendations.

¹¹ This was a concern mentioned by one respondent representing an agency which administered FDPIR benefits to a service area rather than a reservation. In these areas, FDPIR eligibility is contingent upon a household having at least one enrolled member of an American Indian Tribe or Alaska Native Village. However, non-Native populations living on reservations are eligible to receive FDPIR benefits. Since most agencies operate in these locations, this may not be an extensive issue across the program but it is important to mention here since it was highlighted as a problem by an FDPIR program operator.

CHAPTER 7. CONCLUSIONS

In response to the Congressional directive, FNS conducted a survey to understand how the FDPIR program serves homebound and elderly participants, what challenges they face in reaching these populations, and what recommendations FDPIR staff had for improving the program. This report presents a comprehensive analysis of a survey administered to program operators of FDPIR administering agencies. The survey gathered information on multiple aspects of program operations, focusing on the program's accessibility for homebound and elderly participants.

Key findings indicate that FDPIR is a vital resource for many households to ensure food security and FDPIR agencies employ various strategies to provide flexible service to all in their community who need the program. These strategies include offering a variety of distribution methods for participants to receive food packages, multiple application/certification options, and various outreach efforts to keep eligible participants informed about program benefits. At the same time, agencies face substantial challenges. These include limited funding for staffing and home delivery resources, difficulty implementing required certification processes, challenges in reaching remote reservation areas, and available food package options. The COVID-19 pandemic also resulted in changes to program participation and operations and introduced additional challenges.

The survey also solicited recommendations from FDPIR program operators. They emphasized the need for a greater variety of healthy and traditional food options for FDPIR food packages, the use of local produce, and additional financial resources and support, such as increased funding for staffing and home delivery resources.

Altogether, these findings underscore the critical role of the FDPIR program in supporting homebound and elderly populations. As the world evolves, the program faces new and persistent challenges in effectively reaching these vulnerable groups. The findings highlight a need for increased funding and resource support, which is essential for enhancing the program's outreach and delivery capabilities. Moreover, the introduction of additional program flexibilities is imperative to adapt to the changing needs of the population served. These measures are not only crucial for maintaining the current participant base but are also pivotal in attracting and retaining a broader segment of the FDPIR population. Ultimately, the success of FDPIR in this evolving and dynamic environment hinges on its ability to evolve and respond proactively to the emerging needs of the homebound and elderly, ensuring that no eligible individual is left underserved.