As West Virginians remain in self-quarantine to reduce the spread of the novel coronavirus, it’s getting tougher for low-income residents, or people who live in rural areas to adequately feed themselves, said a West Virginia University public health expert.

“We know COVID-19 will disproportionately affect those living in poverty,” said Lauri Andress, assistant professor at the WVU School of Public Health. “The individual level guidance we typically provide on how to eat healthily will collide with the pandemic regulations that have been enacted, leading to a conflict with the structural and systemic issues we know to exist for low-income individuals living in food deserts.”

Andress said many people assume local services, like food pantries, are closed because of the pandemic. This is why clear and concise communication is essential, she said.

“To the extent that we can publicize that services are open, we should do that.”
Food barriers will continue to intensify as long as the COVID-19 crisis continues, she said. “If you have transportation and a steady income, you can drive out of the food desert and secure affordable food,” she said in an email. “In the case of many of the individuals and families who are unemployed or under employed and living in food deserts, the ability to get out of the food desert is dependent on social relationships and infrastructure — the existence of public transportation.”

And for people who own vehicles, there is sometimes the choice of buying food or gasoline, she said.

Further exacerbating the situation are the limited shopping hours adopted by some of the larger grocery store chains.

“Places nearby that were within walking distance have closed due to slow or no business,” Andress said. “Local restaurants are not allowing people inside and instead are using the drive through or drive-up method.”

“Let’s not forget carrying groceries home and walking to and from a bus depot,” she said. “Seniors may or may not have children or relatives available to assist them.”

Andress said the state is cognizant of the problem and applied for waivers to the United States Department of Agriculture for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program assistance for April and May for people who do not receive the maximum benefit allotment. That request was immediately granted and nearly 205,000 individuals and 106,000 households are now covered for the two months.

“Having access to information is a matter of wellbeing, or perhaps life or death in the 21st century,” Andress said. “It is hard to prosper or even function when cut off from knowledge or important information. We should make a concentrated effort to let our rural, low-wealth communities know that the safety net of services is working.”

TWEET @41Suzanne

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