The New Safety Net

By Erine A. Gray

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Rules Committee Testimony

Introduction

My name is Erine Gray and I'm the Founder and CEO of Aunt Bertha, a Public Benefit Corporation based in Austin, TX. We created findhelp.org, a publicly accessible website that's used by millions of people in the US and hundreds of thousands of social workers and care coordinators who assist others. findhelp.org allows people to easily search and connect with food programs, housing programs, and hundreds of thousands of free and reduced cost services provided by government and charitable organizations in the United States.

We are fortunate to live in a generous country with a strong safety net, but for most of us, navigating the safety net is complicated. My experience with the safety net began at an early age. I was born in Olean, NY and my first home was at the Martha Avenue Housing Projects until my parents could afford to buy a house. From time to time, our family was able to eat because of the Food Stamp (now SNAP) program, and we were able to eat lunch at school because of the free lunch program.

The name of our company is inspired by my mother, who raised seven kids and took in two additional kids for a period of time because they didn't have a place to live. Although she wasn't a social worker, she was a janitor, she inspired me to dedicate my life to helping others.

Simplifying Navigation

We can't escape this life without having some curveballs thrown our way. Whether it's caring for aging parents, losing someone close to us, or watching someone we love struggle with addiction, many of us don't know where to begin in managing these crises.

The information age has given us some amazing technological advancements. We live in an age where we can order shaving cream while shaving and it'll be delivered securely to our garage the very next day. Yet, finding the nearest food pantry that is currently open and has capacity can feel like, pun intended, an act of Congress. In 2010, our company set out to fix this information problem.

Eleven years later we've helped millions of people find and connect to social services. Our website is used by people looking for all types of services like help paying rent, finding affordable housing or finding the nearest food pantry. Professional care coordinators and social workers from hospital systems, health plans and nonprofits use our website on behalf of the clients they serve every day.

Every one of us has stories of a time in our lives where we looked around and said to ourselves "I don't know what to do." findhelp.org helps people during these moments. Our website is available to any user, anonymously. If someone finds a program close to them that they qualify for, they can just go ahead and connect electronically to the nonprofit or government agency that provides those services. And in many cases, organizations that provide those services can respond quickly giving the person in need the dignity of a yes or a no in a timely fashion.

Our Austin, TX based data operations team continually works to ensure that the programs showing up in the search results are up-to-date by keeping up with the ever-changing landscape of available services. We partner with nonprofits and give them tools to assist their clients. We protect our users' information and do not sell advertisements, nor do we sell their data.

Our vision is to connect all people in need and the programs that serve them — with dignity and ease. In order to solve this problem, we need to get people the information they need in the moments they need them.

Digitization Tells Stories & Then We Can Act

Before the internet, in both small towns and big cities, professional social workers and care coordinators have been doing this hard work each and every day. They still do. But up until now, we were not able to quickly understand where the supply of available social services is meeting the demand for them. In order to figure out which programs to fund, public foundations and governments would spend months or even years using anecdotal information to figure out what's needed.

Now, as this information continues to be digitized, the data tells the story of where supply is not meeting demand in near real-time. For example, when COVID-19 hit, our data showed a dramatic spike in the need for a range of social services, from food programs to housing assistance. According to our data, food related searches increased 326% from February to April. Accordingly, the search for non-emergency health services as a percentage decreased as most people were putting off non-essential healthcare.
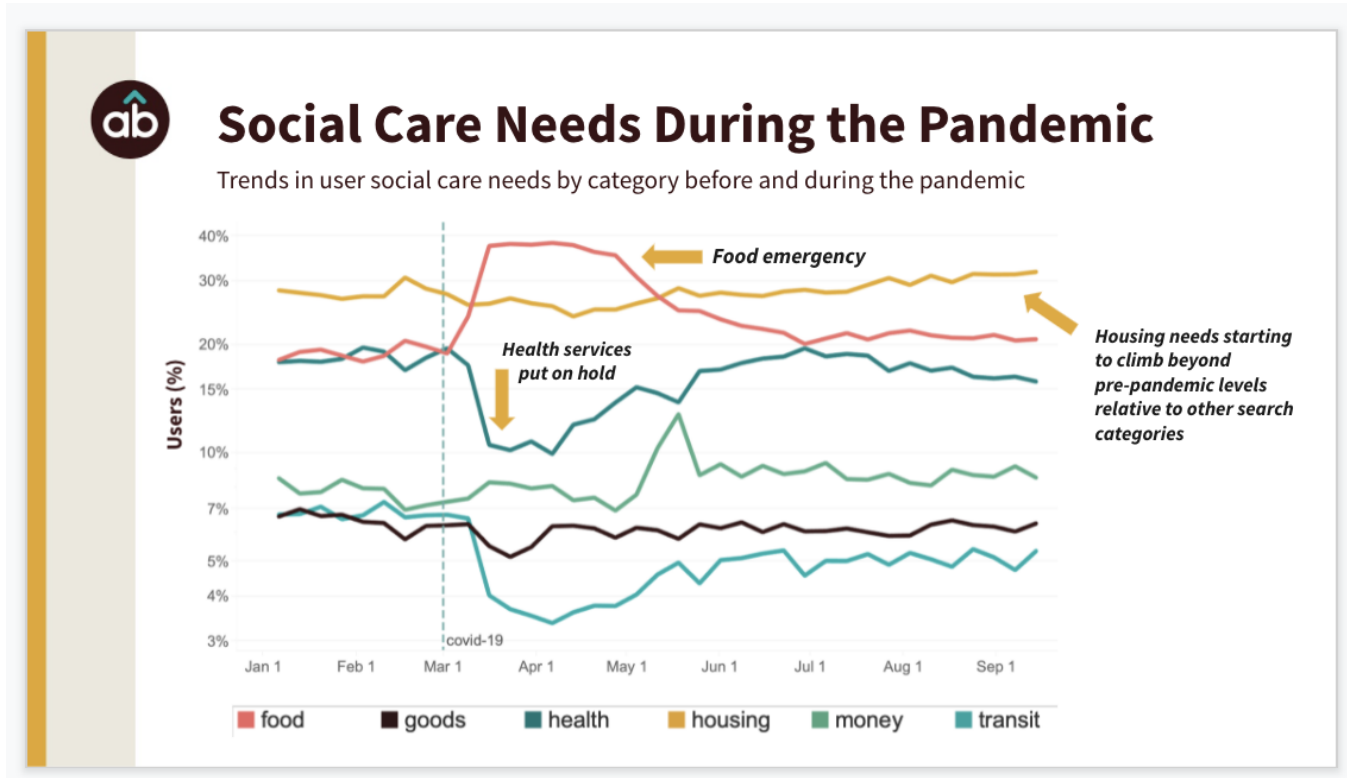
Figure 1: Visual demonstration of the increase in searches for food related programs during the COVID-19 epidemic.

By analyzing the anonymized and aggregated search data, we also see a relationship between demand for social services and when the federal stimulus checks went out. Search volume went down as more people had extra money in their pockets and businesses started hiring again.

Digging in further, we can also analyze trends across locations. In the graph below, based solely on search activity on the findhelp.org network, we can identify states that do not provide dental benefits to adults on Medicaid.

Searches for Dental Services

Searches on the findhelp.org network demonstrate a higher search volume for dental services as a proportion of all searches in states that do not have extensive dental coverage for adults on Medicaid.

States with high search volume for dental services do not have extensive dental coverage

Users per 100,000

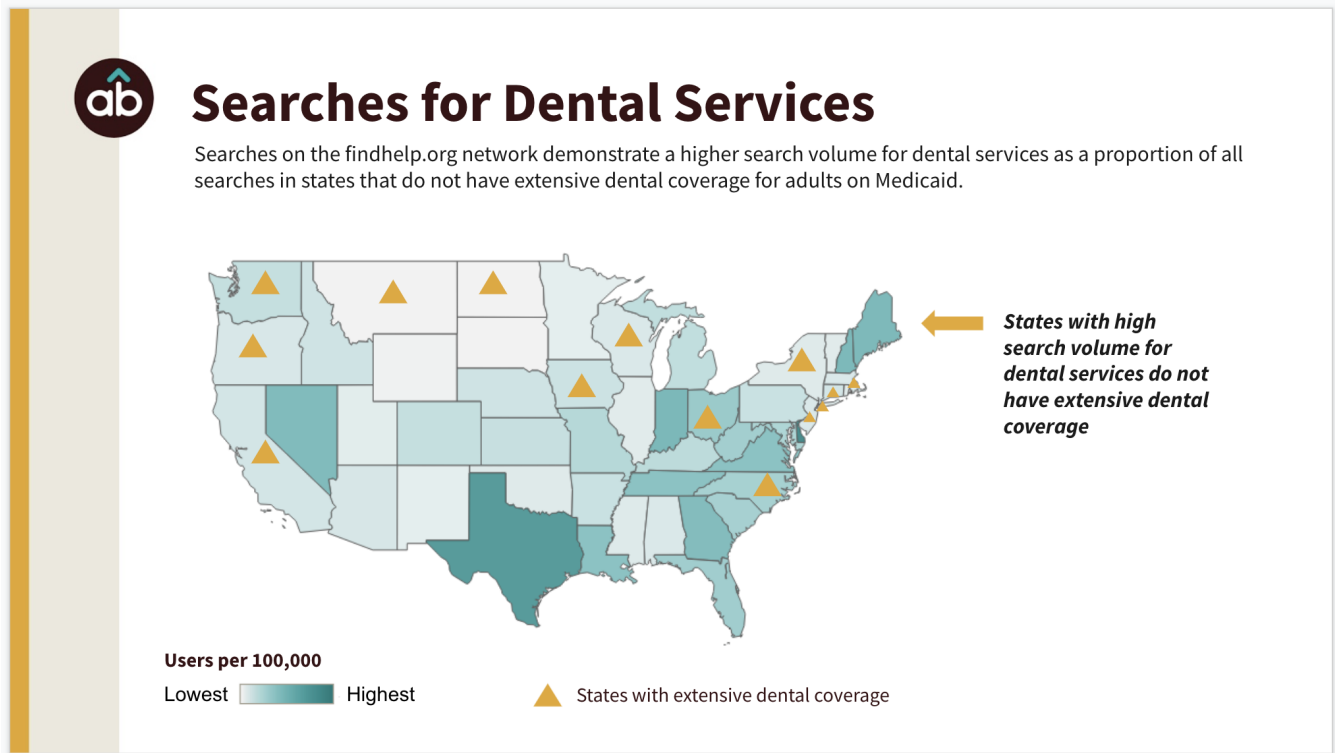Lowest ▢ Highest ▲ States with extensive dental coverage

Figure 2: Our analysis finds that we see higher volumes of search activity for dental care services in states that do not offer extensive dental coverage for adults on Medicaid.

In the addendum, you will find what may be some interesting trends for the states that you live in based on search activity we are seeing across the findhelp.org network.

A New Safety Net

With new information available we have an opportunity to envision a new safety net built for the information age. The new safety net must be responsive — not just to trends, but to individual people — right in their moment of need. Government alone cannot build this new safety net. We need nonprofits, religious institutions, and the private sector.

Imagine the possibilities of what a new safety net might look like. If we saw a dramatic spike in demand for food because a factory closed down, we could immediately speak with local nonprofits to ask them what they need. Funds could be transferred in moments and they could serve people right away.

A new safety net makes it easy for people to raise their hand and say "I need help." And those same people deserve to get that help without having to jump through bureaucratic hoops. The good news is that this **can be done**. As a country, we've solved far more complicated information and logistical problems in other sectors.

Conclusion

Reinhold Niebuhr once said that: *"Nothing that is **worth doing** can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope."*

Ending Hunger in the United States is one of those things that is **worth doing.** But I differ with Niebuhr on this. I believe it can happen in our lifetime. It'll be hard. It'll take work. And it'll take hope.

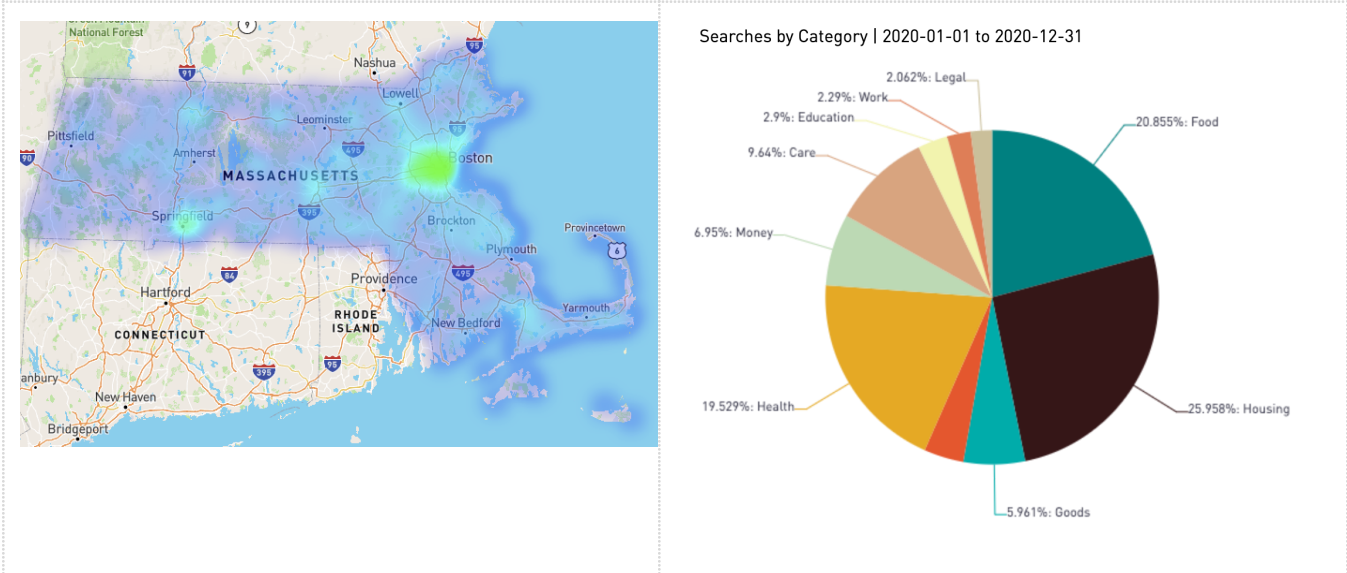Thank you for the opportunity to share my thoughts today.

Addendum

In this addendum, you will find some helpful insights about what your citizens are searching for in aggregate. This is just a small subset of the type of data we are happy to provide as you work towards your vision of ending hunger by 2030.

In the last 3 months in Massachusetts, housing has been the top searched for need, specifically "help find housing." During this same time frame last year, food was the most searched for need, specifically "food delivery." We think this is reflective of the population's general needs, particularly as it relates to the evolution of the pandemic. This time last year many families were struggling to obtain groceries as a result of loss of income as well as panic buying and supply chain disruptions. Many medically vulnerable people were afraid to leave their home due to the threat of the virus, and turned to our platform for help delivering food. Now housing, our typical top searched for service, is the most searched for need as many families struggle to find and afford housing.

The benefit of having realtime data is that it often allows us to identify needs as they arise. In Oklahoma, we can see as we approached summer, "help pay for utilities'' quickly became our most searched for term. Below you'll find a small subset of summary data for each state you represent — illustrating the breadth of our search and needs data.
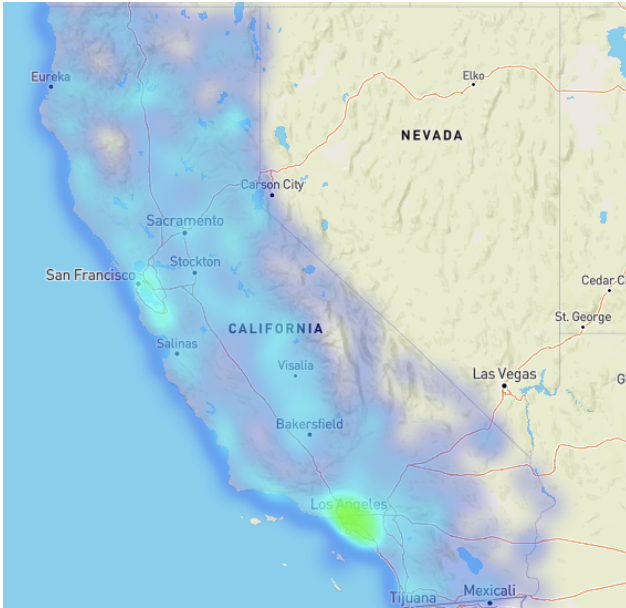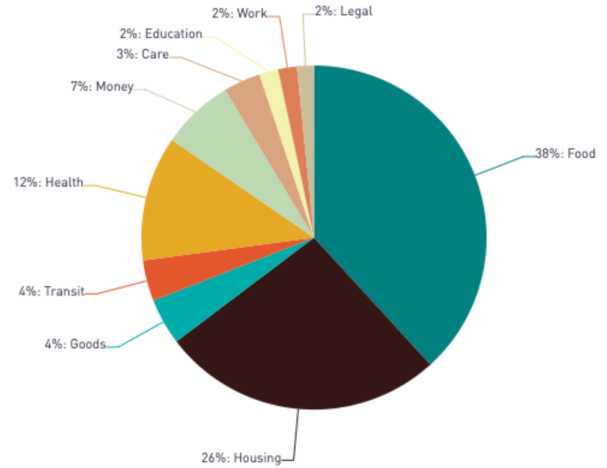
Massachusetts

Searches by Category | 2020-01-01 to 2020-12-31

- 2.062%: Legal
- 2.29%: Work
- 2.9%: Education
- 9.64%: Care
- 6.95%: Money
- 19.529%: Health
- 20.855%: Food
- 25.958%: Housing
- 5.961%: Goods

Top Searched Terms in Massachusetts in 2020

Term	Domain	Searches
food pantry	food	6,791
help pay for housing	housing	5,710
food delivery	food	4,920
help find housing	housing	4,803
emergency food	food	3,868
help pay for utilities	housing	3,798
temporary shelter	housing	2,168
help pay for food	food	2,054
housing vouchers	housing	1,786
financial assistance	money	1,779
help pay for internet or phone	housing	1,658
meals	food	1,521
food	food	1,496
counseling	health	1,330

California

Searches by Category | 2020-01-01 to 2020-12-31

- 38%: Food
- 26%: Housing
- 12%: Health
- 7%: Money
- 4%: Transit
- 4%: Goods
- 3%: Care
- 2%: Education
- 2%: Work
- 2%: Legal

Top Searched Terms in California in 2020

Term	Domain	Searches
food pantry	food	87,763
emergency food	food	48,552
food delivery	food	40,427
help pay for housing	housing	35,877
help find housing	housing	25,062
help pay for utilities	housing	16,930
meals	food	13,088
help pay for food	food	13,052
housing vouchers	housing	11,188
temporary shelter	housing	10,964
help pay for internet or phone	housing	10,564
food	food	10,173
government food benefits	food	9,088

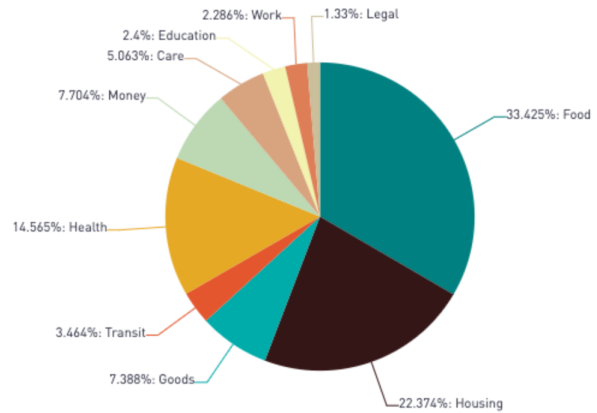## Colorado

Searches by Category | 2020-01-01 to 2020-12-31

- 2%: Legal
- 4%: Work
- 3%: Education
- 5%: Care
- 10%: Money
- 15%: Health
- 6%: Transit
- 5%: Goods
- 19%: Food
- 31%: Housing
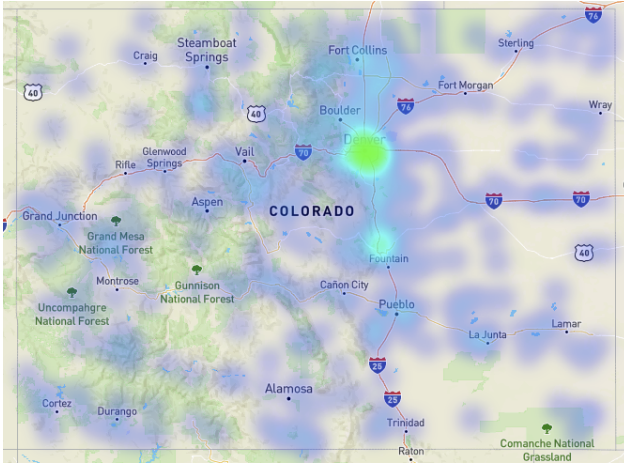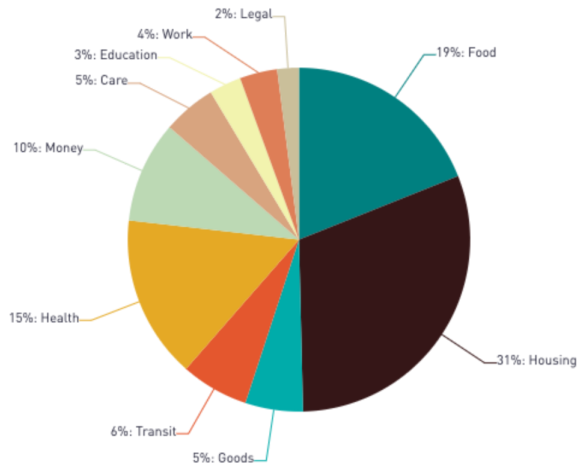
Top Searched Terms in Colorado in 2020

Term	Domain	Searches
help pay for housing	housing	8,882
emergency food	food	4,600
food pantry	food	4,080
help pay for utilities	housing	3,736
help find housing	housing	3,692
food delivery	food	2,854
housing vouchers	housing	2,075
help pay for food	food	1,993
financial assistance	money	1,854
help pay for internet or phone	housing	1,799
transportation for healthcare	transit	1,626
temporary shelter	housing	1,563
transportation	transit	1,237

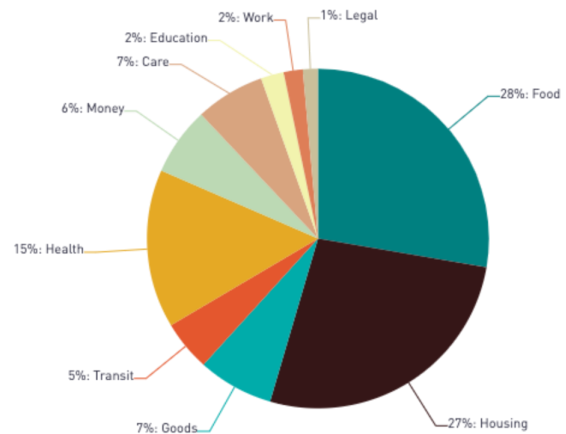## Maryland

Searches by Category | 2020-01-01 to 2020-12-31

- 1.33%: Legal
- 2.286%: Work
- 2.4%: Education
- 5.063%: Care
- 7.704%: Money
- 33.425%: Food
- 14.565%: Health
- 3.464%: Transit
- 7.388%: Goods
- 22.374%: Housing

Top Searched Terms in Maryland in 2020

Term	Domain	Searches
food pantry	food	15,396
help pay for housing	housing	6,827
food delivery	food	5,727
emergency food	food	4,895
help find housing	housing	3,565
help pay for utilities	housing	2,932
free meals	food	2,443
help pay for food	food	2,416
diapers & formula	goods	2,209
financial assistance	money	1,979
housing vouchers	housing	1,687
temporary shelter	housing	1,415
help pay for internet or phone	housing	1,352

Pennsylvania

Searches by Category | 2020-01-01 to 2020-12-31

- 28%: Food
- 27%: Housing
- 15%: Health
- 7%: Goods
- 7%: Care
- 6%: Money
- 5%: Transit
- 2%: Education
- 2%: Work
- 1%: Legal

Top Searched Terms in Pennsylvania in 2020

Term	Domain	Searches
food pantry	food	18,431
food delivery	food	13,477
help pay for housing	housing	13,450
help find housing	housing	11,785
emergency food	food	10,743
help pay for utilities	housing	10,630
food pantries & emergency food	food	10,609
help pay for food	food	5,232
meals	food	4,353
utilities	housing	4,064
transportation for healthcare	transit	3,899
housing vouchers	housing	3,872
temporary shelter	housing	3,808

New York

Searches by Category | 2020-01-01 to 2020-12-31
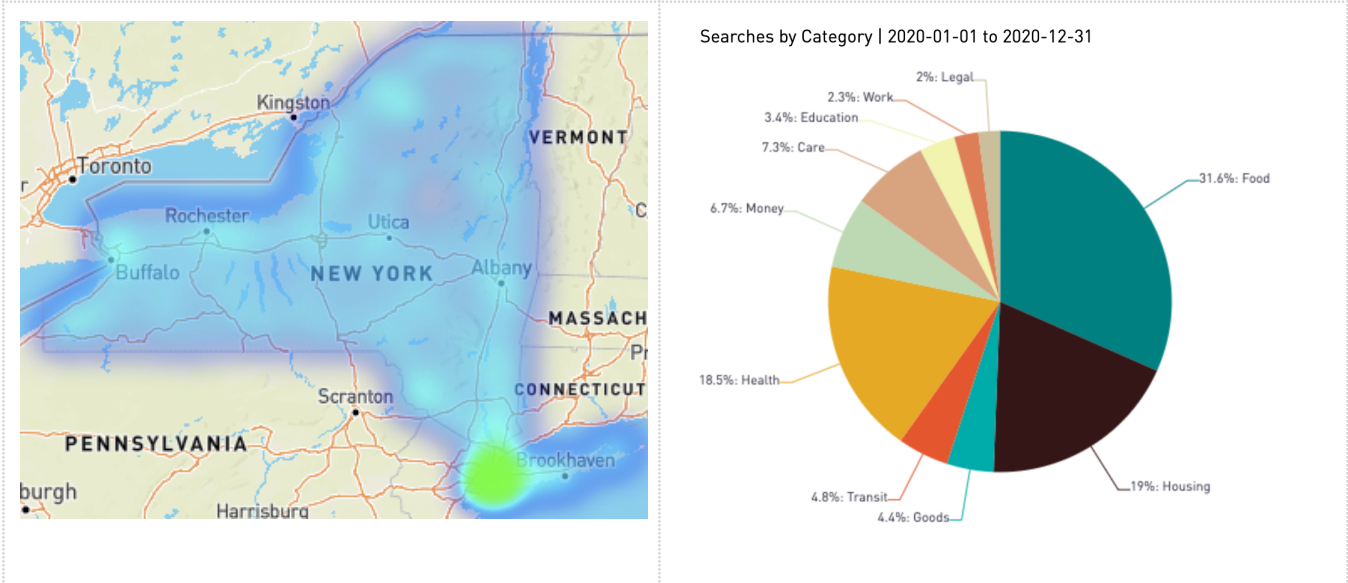
Top Searched Terms in New York in 2020

Term	Domain	Searches
meals	food	30,516
food pantry	food	12,812
food delivery	food	12,788
help pay for housing	housing	10,660
help find housing	housing	9,458
emergency food	food	8,928
help pay for utilities	housing	6,043
help pay for food	food	4,330
transportation for healthcare	transit	4,231
financial assistance	money	3,782
counseling	health	3,573
individual counseling	health	3,342

North Carolina
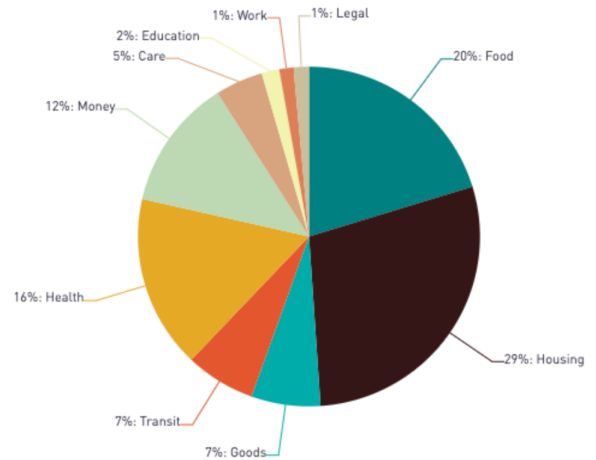

Searches by Category | 2020-01-01 to 2020-12-31

- 1.562%: Work
- 1.215%: Legal
- 1.945%: Education
- 5.111%: Care
- 8.944%: Money
- 20.901%: Food
- 18.915%: Health
- 29.759%: Housing
- 6.093%: Transit
- 5.555%: Goods
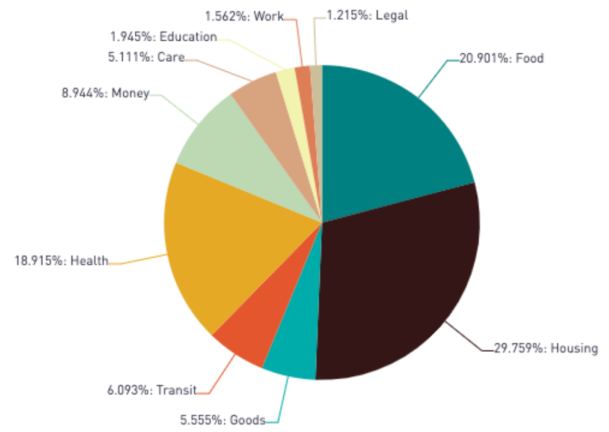
Top Searched Terms in North Carolina in 2020

Term	Domain	Searches
food pantry	food	12,182
help pay for housing	housing	11,783
help pay for utilities	housing	10,957
help find housing	housing	7,347
emergency food	food	6,978
food delivery	food	6,427
help pay for food	food	3,541
financial assistance	money	3,391
help pay for internet or phone	housing	3,230
temporary shelter	housing	3,200
housing vouchers	housing	2,976
transportation for healthcare	transit	2,975
transportation	transit	2,566

Oklahoma

Searches by Category | 2020-01-01 to 2020-12-31

- 1% Work
- 1% Legal
- 2% Education
- 5% Care
- 20% Food
- 12% Money
- 16% Health
- 7% Transit
- 7% Goods
- 29% Housing

Top Searched Terms in Oklahoma in 2020

Term	Domain	Searches
help pay for housing	housing	1,838
help pay for utilities	housing	1,516
food pantry	food	1,208
emergency food	food	1,106
financial assistance	money	1,033
food delivery	food	910
help find housing	housing	677
help pay for food	food	634
help pay for internet or phone	housing	521
temporary shelter	housing	521
transportation	transit	483
housing vouchers	housing	473
government food benefits	food	393

Texas

Searches by Category | 2020-01-01 to 2020-12-31

- 19%: Food
- 35%: Housing
- 17%: Health
- 8%: Money
- 6%: Goods
- 5%: Transit
- 4%: Care
- 2%: Education
- 2%: Work
- 2%: Legal
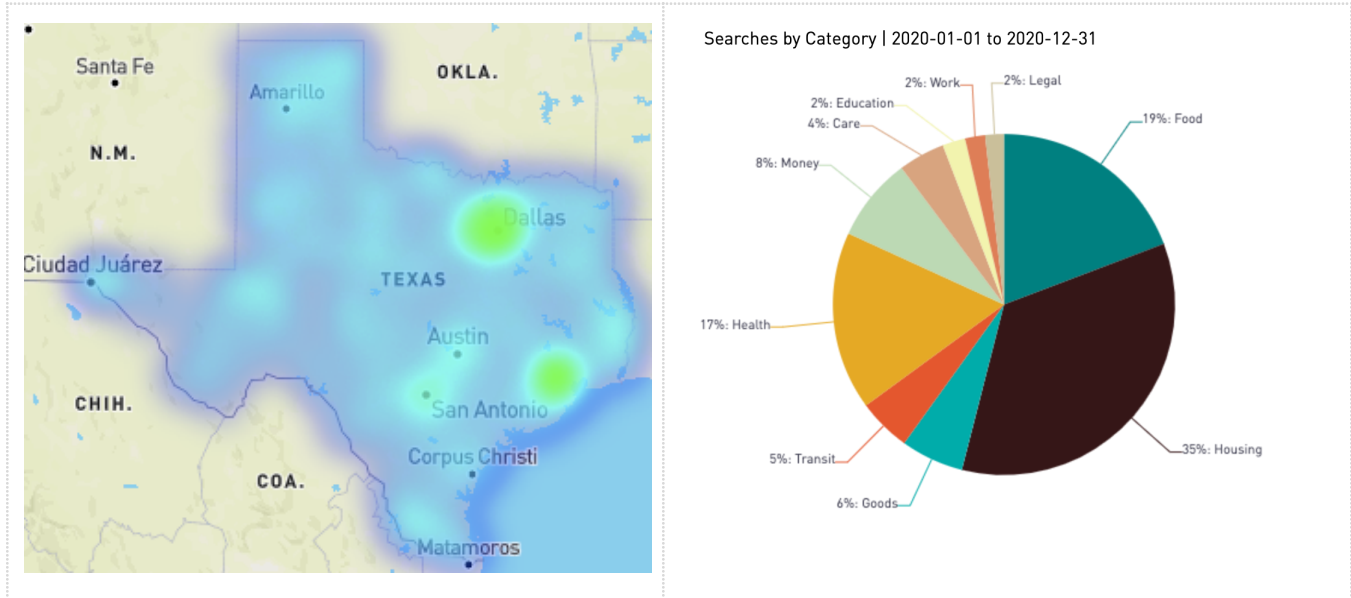
Top Searched Terms in Texas in 2020

Term	Domain	Searches
help pay for housing	housing	63,930
help pay for utilities	housing	49,097
food pantry	food	41,527
help find housing	housing	27,065
emergency food	food	23,250
food delivery	food	20,259
dental care	health	17,270
temporary shelter	housing	14,965
financial assistance	money	14,657
housing vouchers	housing	13,952
help pay for internet or phone	housing	12,734
help pay for food	food	11,999
transportation for healthcare	transit	8,967
government food benefits	food	8,050

Minnesota

Searches by Category | 2020-01-01 to 2020-12-31

- 22%: Food
- 24.6%: Housing
- 7.1%: Goods
- 6.2%: Transit
- 17.2%: Health
- 11.2%: Money
- 6.6%: Care
- 1.6%: Education
- 1.6%: Work
- 1.9%: Legal
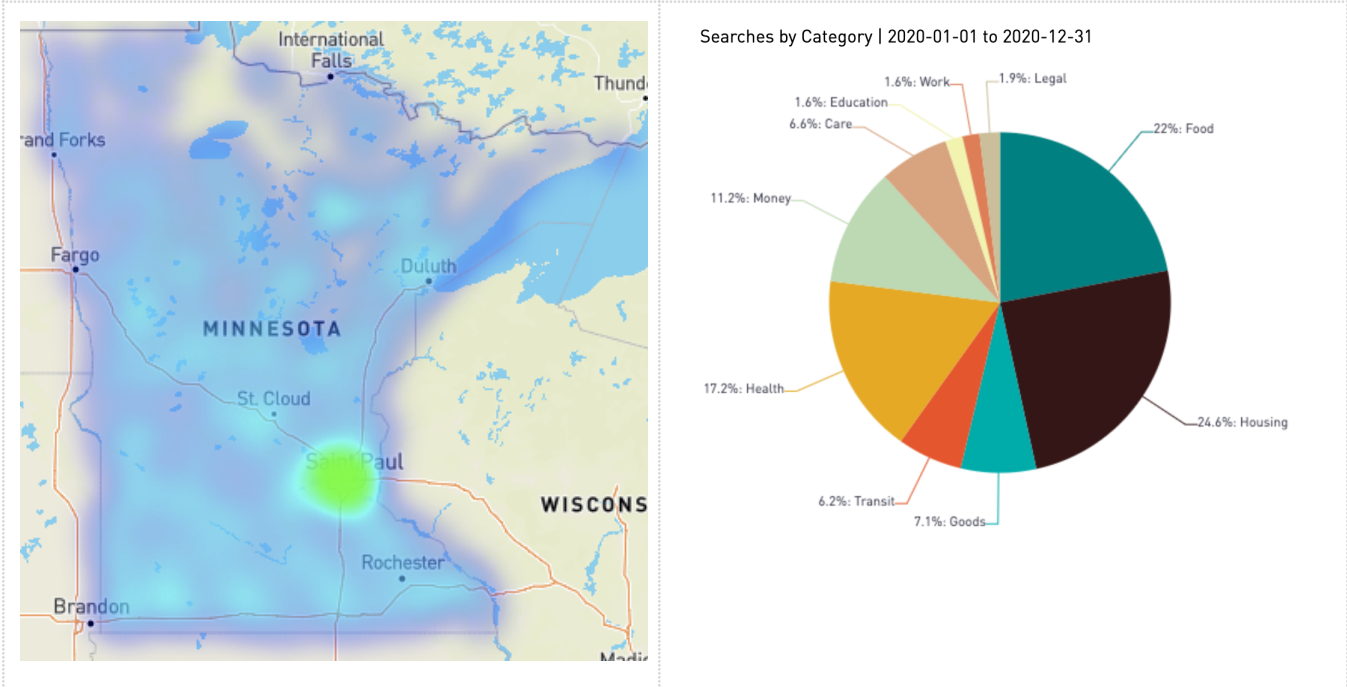
Top Searched Terms in Minnesota in 2020

Term	Domain	Searches
help pay for housing	housing	2,636
food pantry	food	1,964
food delivery	food	1,844
emergency food	food	1,752
help find housing	housing	1,142
help pay for utilities	housing	1,132
financial assistance	money	1,089
help pay for food	food	889
help pay for internet or phone	housing	732
meals	food	677
housing vouchers	housing	660
transportation for healthcare	transit	582