

Pinto Bean and Rice Burritos with Victorie



(Photo by Josh Duke on Upsplash)

We take a look at how transportation barriers, one of the social determinants of health, impacts Victorie. Victorie, one of our program participants in our Healthy Choice Food Box Program, is speaking while she makes a delicious home recipe: pinto bean and rice burritos.

Victorie is a mother, wife, and grandmother who has been a program participant of Denver Food Rescue's (DFR) Healthy Choice Food Box (HCFB) program for the last five months. This program started in the summer of 2021 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and many requests for Denver Food Rescue to start a delivery program. Victorie discovered the program through the Denver Helps Facebook page.

Each box contains a variety of produce provided by a partnership with East Denver Food Hub, and is inspired by different cultural cuisines. Victorie chose Box 2, which has items like pinto beans, rice, tomatoes, apples, lettuce, jalapeños, and more, products that change periodically with availability and the seasonality of produce.

Victorie has many strengths. One of those is her connection to her family and her community. She is the kind of person who helps her community whenever she can. During the pandemic, she worked to support neighbors with resources when she had them to spare. She connects with others through Facebook and says that she feels privileged to have an internet connection. She has also been spreading the word about the HCFB program to as many people as she can, especially the elderly in her community and those folks she knows don't have access to the internet. "This is a very unique program, and I think it could be beneficial to so many people. . . . Going to foodbanks, those are nice, but, I mean, you can't carry a box of cans back home. It's very, very difficult, so [the program] has definitely been a blessing for my family because we don't have transportation. The bus is our route," says Victorie.

Victorie's recipe choice, pinto bean and rice burritos, was inspired by her husband's family home cooking. The pinto bean and rice burrito recipe is special to her because she and her husband lived in Louisiana, where it is inspired by traditional Louisiana red beans and rice. She learned to cook from her husband's family with whom she has a strong relationship.

She and her husband have been married for over two decades and Victorie says they used their time in lockdown during the pandemic to reconnect and spend quality time together. Victorie says that cooking and eating with her family helps them bond. Specifically, she and her daughter spend time talking about cooking new recipes. Her family currently lives in Denver, where public transportation is more accessible than in rural Louisiana, but she hopes to move back someday citing cost of living in Denver as the main reason: "My kids are having kids, and so it's like okay, you know like, it's too expensive for them to survive on their own out here, too. So if we can find some place out there, I'm fine with my kids still staying with me. Then at least they don't have that hardship or that stress level. I've been there, and I don't want my kids to go through that."

Typically Victorie accesses groceries through delivery from places like Walmart and uses her SNAP benefits to make her budget stretch as much as possible. She uses public transportation to get around when she needs to. She has not had a car in four years and says that it's challenging to access healthy food when taking the bus because it is difficult to manage heavy grocery bags on public transportation; produce can be particularly heavy. West Colfax, Victorie's neighborhood, has an environmental health score below Denver county's average score. Her neighborhood has about 74.7 percent of households having ready available access to a vehicle while Denver County as a whole averages 89.9 percent (CO Equity Compass). Meanwhile RTD fares have also increased. The cost of a single ride is now \$3.00, which comes out to be one of the most expensive public transit [cost for city size](#).

A unique feature of DFR's food box delivery program is that we are able to deliver produce to families that might not otherwise have access to this necessity, or those like Victorie who struggle to bring groceries home on public transportation. Traveling on public transportation during the pandemic was especially hard for her due to her asthma and worry about Covid. She has a small child living in her home, and her daughter, who also lives with her, is pregnant. Having produce delivered has been helpful, making her feel safer while accessing food without using public transportation.

Housing and rent cost burdens are also factored into the social determinants of health score. The median family income is [38.5K](#) in West Colfax compared to 77K in Denver as a whole. The West Colfax neighborhood has a 57.2 percent gini index, which measures the level of income inequality in the area. Perfect equality is a score of 0 ([CO Equity Compass](#)). Victorie's rent was recently increased to almost more than she can pay after an investment group bought the property. Her building used to be managed by the man whose father built it, but Victorie says it doesn't feel as much like a community as it used to, and there are fewer and fewer neighbors she can rely on.

"Where we're at is under big time gentrification. . . . When the pandemic happened, we had, I'd say, at least four families, they definitely have moved, because the rent went up. . . . We have one neighbor . . . he had something happen with his job, then he ended up getting a new job, then he was injured, and he was an elderly man, and then he couldn't make the rent. And so I know he ended up moving a couple months ago. During the pandemic, anything I had left over, I'd make him a plate, and send my kids over there. We did have a few neighbors where we were trading off food. Like, 'Oh well, this is a box I got, and you know this is stuff we're not going to use,' and our apartment at one time was a lot of close knit people, but during the pandemic the rent went up and they sold . . . they went up on our rent almost \$700. . . . They gave us an offer that we could either move or this was the new rate. . . . There was nothing I could do. We have no vehicle. It was a two-month time span. It was impossible to think about even moving somewhere else."

In our November survey, the two most cited barriers to accessing healthy food were financial costs and time. Victorie discusses how these things have been challenging for her as well. Specifically, the inflation of meat has impacted her food budget, but the HCFB program has helped: "We use about 90 percent of the food that's in there. The other 10 percent, I might not know how to cook, or it goes bad before I get a chance to use it."

In the past, she has overcome multiple challenges including housing barriers. After moving to Denver, Victorie's family lived in hotels for seven years, even staying in a Volunteers of America shelter for a few weeks. A homeless coalition eventually helped them with the deposit for their current apartment. Despite everything, Victorie has a positive outlook for her family's future and is extremely resilient and resourceful. As a goal, Victorie is learning about coding and social enterprises, continuing to create a prosperous future for her family and community.

The Healthy Choice Food Box program has been an opportunity to continue supporting individuals and families experiencing different challenges and we acknowledge the work is not done. We thank Victorie for her time with this project and for sharing her story with us.

Pinto Bean and Rice Burritos Recipe

Ingredients:

1 lb pinto beans
1/4 cup of green chili (can, fresh, or frozen)
2 cups of rice
2 teaspoons of salt
1 bag of flour tortillas
Shredded Cheese
Any other burrito fillings you like or have
can be added: seasoned ground beef,
salsa, lettuce, tomatoes

Instructions:

1. Rinse beans and check for any yucky beans (as my grandma would say) or any foreign materials; sometimes you may find a rock or stick.
2. Slowly add beans to a large pot and bring to a slow boil with enough water to cover the beans.
3. Add chili. It is up to you how hot or mild you want the heat of your beans. For 1 lb of beans, I will add a 1/4 cup of frozen green chili, (hot, not mild). Stir frequently until beans soften, usually 2–3 hours. Add water as needed.
4. Prepare rice and burrito fixings.
5. Heat tortillas in a skillet, just about 10–15 seconds per side. This helps with rolling up your burrito and tastes better as well.
6. Fill tortillas with fillings and cheese and serve.

Tips:

Soaking the beans overnight will make for reduced cooking time.