Focus on Food Security 2013: END HUNGER IN WASHINGTON
Northwest Harvest’s Focus Group Report, January 2013

Northwest Harvest is committed not only to providing nutritious food to hungry people, but also to fighting to eliminate hunger. One of the ways we do that is by lifting up the voices of the people who use the emergency food system to survive.

This Focus on Food Security 2013 report is a summary of five focus groups held at food banks throughout the state. It chronicles not only the stories, but also the state of hunger in Washington. Our intent is to educate about hunger and to advocate for those whose voices often go unheard. Each year we gather food bank clients across the state and ask the same set of questions. This year, we heard more loudly their exhaustion with struggling to provide for themselves and frustration at public policy decisions that ignore their needs.

Who are they? They are the parents of young children and senior citizens, lifelong residents and newcomers, working people and the disabled, veterans of our military and resilient survivors. They are our neighbors, our friends and our families. Perhaps you will even see yourself in their stories.

Although Northwest Harvest itself does not receive government funding for operations, many of the people we serve and many of the food programs we supply rely on publicly-funded programs. It is our honor as well as our privilege to share with you their stories in these pages and continue our commitment to making a better future possible.

Thank you to our partner food programs, their staff and volunteers who assisted with the focus groups: Susan Urhausen, Kettle Falls Community Chest; Suzy McNeilly, Council on Aging and Human Services, Colfax; Jim Beaudoin and Beth Elliott, Southeast Tacoma FISH Food Bank; Pat Sajdak and Patty Nichols, Washington Gorge Action Programs; and Elizabeth Grant, Snohomish Community Food Bank.

We are also grateful to these organizations for use of meeting space to conduct our groups: Kettle Falls Senior Center; Colfax Public Library; Lutheran Church of Christ the King, Tacoma; Mountain View Grange Hall #98, White Salmon; and Snohomish Fire and Rescue.

Sincerely,

Shelley Rotondo, Executive Director
INTRODUCTION

“In Hunger is more complex than it seems.”

These are the words of Yovana, married mother of two, summing up her own experience. Yovanna is one of the 62 people who spoke to Northwest Harvest during our annual focus groups about their struggles with hunger, their reliance on food banks, and the multi-faceted problems they face.

Hunger is a symptom of poverty. Its causes are a complicated weave of joblessness, underemployment, healthcare issues, homelessness, family crises, a failed safety net, and public policy decisions, among other factors.

Each year, we travel to different regions throughout Washington to listen to people who depend on food banks and the public safety net for survival. We seek out real stories of who is going hungry and why. These are people’s first-hand accounts of how economic changes in their households and communities have forced them to choose between feeding their children or themselves, eating or heating their homes, taking their prescription medications or buying groceries. We have also heard how policy changes and budget decisions at the local, state and federal level have affected them.

In addition to qualitative information, we examine quantitative data specific to each of the counties where these focus groups are held. These include basic economic indicators, such as the number of persons receiving aid and a comparison of the federal poverty level to the self-sufficiency standard—the income necessary in that county to meet basic needs.

While hunger is affected by regional differences and rural, urban, or suburban environments, food insecurity has affected Washingtonians across the board:

- The USDA ranked Washington the 14th hungriest state in the nation in 2011.¹
- One in four children in Washington lives in a household that experiences food insecurity or hunger.²
- More than one million Washington residents rely on the Basic Food program (SNAP, formerly food stamps) to meet the nutritional needs of their households.³
- Poverty in the United States remains at 15 percent, statistically unchanged from 2010. This means that 46.2 million people—or nearly one in six Americans—lived below the official poverty line of $23,021 a year for a family of four.⁴

We invite you to consider this data as well as the complexities of the lives of the Washington residents featured in this Focus on Food Security report. Northwest Harvest’s own long experience in hunger relief helps us draw conclusions on how we can best cut through the complexity of issues to resolve the problem of food insecurity that now plagues our state to a record-breaking degree. We invite you to consider our recommendations on pages 14-15, and join us in finding the resources and political will to eliminate hunger.
White Salmon

Driving across eight counties and one state border and back again to get to our focus group in White Salmon, we glimpsed the isolation our participants spoke of and their challenges in accessing affordable services in this tourist area. They were residents of both Klickitat and Skamania counties, and most need to cross the Columbia River into Oregon on a regular basis for affordable grocery shopping and even for health care.

Karen, who has lived in the Columbia Gorge area for 30 years, said, “It’s much easier to see the problems. I could easily say let’s generate more jobs or move to a cheaper area, but I don’t know what the solution is or the answer is. This is home.”

Traveling Long Distances for Food

Several of the group members were senior citizens and long-time residents. They overcame the higher prices and fewer choices in their local area by carpooling for monthly shopping trips to Oregon. For Cindy, that is her only shopping trip of the month, and she supplements with food bank visits.

Karen said she would prefer to shop local, but cannot make that choice when a can of tuna costs 48 cents in an Oregon store versus $1.19 at her local market. “I want fresh, I want healthy, I want fiber,” she said. Mary concurred, “I’m torn between being loyal [to the local store] and eating!”

Jewell, who grew up as a meat delivery man’s daughter, understood the higher cost of getting groceries to their rural areas. She was especially glad for the local option of farmers markets. “The Senior Center has coupons for fresh farmers market vegetables and that helps out quite a bit.”

Some of the group used the food bank in Stevenson, while others used the food bank in Bingen. Each person acknowledged the value of nutrition, and wished for more fresh fruits and vegetables. They shared recipes and secrets for making food stretch longer.

Need Healthy Food

Joseph and his mother run out of food stamps by the middle of the month and find themselves strapped. They are both diabetics and struggle to make use of the food they get at food banks.

“No matter what we get in our food boxes we have to do what we can to make it good for our bodies. Most of us are disabled, have infirmities, get old—there are a lot of diet changes. I don’t have diabetes or anything like that but there are other obvious reasons for me to do the best I can with what I get to make it healthy,” Karen said.

Yovana, who was pregnant, found herself with gestational diabetes. She went without checking her blood sugar for three weeks because the test strips recommended by diabetes counselors were too expensive. She tried using the meter that her insurance covers but it’s inaccurate and she can’t get it adjusted. She is managing her diabetes through her diet without measuring blood sugar levels. She sighed, “How valuable to really take care of your body.”

Hunger is Complex

Yovana’s husband makes just enough money so that they are not eligible for food stamps, WIC, or free school meals for her two children. “I feel like we’re in the middle, not making that little money, but not that much money. The bills are overwhelming. The food bank complements what my food budget is, so what I get I feel grateful for. Many cases are out there like that—in the middle. Hunger is more complex than it seems.” Receiving diapers at the food bank on recent trips helped her so much and “was like fresh water.”

Mary, who attended the group with her adult son Michael, said: “We know people who are in worse shape for the wear. People with kids, I don’t get how they do it.” When Michael became
homeless she had him move in with her and do some of the chores around the house. She helps him stretch his $180 per month in food stamps. “I’m a penny pincher,” she said. "My theory is I’m grateful for it, stretch it out as much as you can but never waste anything that’s free. To me wasting is just horrible.”

**Protect Children and Seniors**

The group as a whole made it clear that children and senior citizens need the protection of government services.

Cindy, who said she pays all her bills first and then she eats, added, “I would like not to see Social Security/Medicare benefits cut. The elderly—they like to take away from the elderly and the disabled first. That seems to be where they want to take cuts first: the poor, the elderly, us, the food banks, the low income.”

“I agree that our seniors and our children should be taken care of first,” Jewell said. “The politicians ought to take a cut. If they would take a modest cut, they wouldn’t be so short on what needs to go to seniors and children. Seniors have put their time in, they’ve produced, done what they could. The job that they worked, paycheck to paycheck, paid for these politicians to live cushy lives, and they want to take away from us?”

Mary added, “Between transportation, gas prices, not everyone has the ability to fend for themselves. Food for everybody, period.”

Mary echoed others in wishing that the government would care more about hunger in this country than natural disasters in other countries: “I don’t mind feeding a neighbor, but that’s like feeding the neighbor children before your own. We can do something for others, but only if we can afford to after taking care of our own. We are the children of this country.”

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### Monthly income needed for self-sufficiency:

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Self-Sufficiency Standard: The graph shows federal poverty level compared to the income needed to provide basic needs for a family of four in these counties.
Southeast Tacoma

Focus group participants in Tacoma illustrated how living in an urban area provides more resources, but also transportation challenges to access them. The group named several food banks and meal programs that offered services tailored to their needs as families, seniors, working and disabled people. William pointed out, “The way this gas situation is going up you got to choose between getting gas or getting food.”

“Any food money is gone because it goes to other bills,” Cathy added. “Then the gas money is next, then you’re stuck with no gas money, no gas money and you’re lucky if all your bills are paid.”

Taking Care of Children

Most of the group members were responsible for the care of minor children or grandchildren. Veronica, who is helping with her son’s six children, said the food bank makes it possible. “When you can come at least once a week to get fresh fruits and vegetables, that’s so helpful,” she said.

Carmen said, “My daughter is in the military, in Afghanistan. My grandkids are bouncing off the walls worried about her. I break down the food so we can feed them, and they’re still hungry. I’m there to take care of them. It’s really rough.”

Kim said teenagers are extra hard to feed. “I have to hide some things like vegetables, cheese, sometimes even milk, not just the snacky stuff, because they’re eating it all in one day.”

“We need more jobs. I’m in the process of trying out for a job but I couldn’t find anything, being new in the area. Compared to going to food banks and doing all this, I’d rather have a job, but still I have to go to food banks to help the kids.”

School Meals Help Families Get By

Carmen said it’s easier when her grandkids are in school, but “summer time is the hardest.” William, who fishes at local fishing holes to help feed his household of seven, said they don’t qualify for free or reduced-price meals at school. “My daughter goes to school, sometimes stomach growling, because we can’t afford to buy her lunch. You make $5 too much over the limit then your kid goes hungry. It’s not fair for the poor folks or average folks.”

Cathy, who has a teenage son with cerebral palsy, said that his social security income disqualifies him for free lunches or meals, "and he’s hungry. He’s a teenager now so he eats everything.”

Food Stamps Are Essential

“Growing up, my mom was a single mom and raised my brother and me, so we got food stamps. As an adult sometimes we got food stamps, but with a kid with special needs we’re in an income bracket where we’re just above the eligibility line for food stamps,” Cathy continued.

Lisa said about her SNAP benefits, “It’s something you can work with. I use my food stamps to supplement what I get from the food bank.”

Carmen is able to use her food stamps at the commissary to make them stretch. But when her disability check went up by $20, “they whacked me back by $20, and my rent didn’t go down!”

Robin, who has five in her household, said, “Right now I’m in the process of downsizing, coming out of my house because I can’t afford to eat. It’s ridiculous, and I’m working!”

Food Banks a Critical Supplement

Viola explained her family’s situation, “I make just a little too much to qualify for food stamps, so I use the food bank and that’s very helpful. In 2009 I got laid off.
“I find myself in a situation I never thought I’d be in,” said Lee, a veteran.

“Economic times, the way things are, things are tough now. Thankfully these food banks are here, ready for the people who need it. I’m a veteran. I know a lot of vets are on the street, no luck with employment. I said this would never happen to me and here I am.”

I’d never heard of the food bank. Being off for 9 months, the only job I could find was in Bellevue while I live in DuPont, so a lot of my money goes to gas. I use this food bank because it’s on the way. A lot of times I find that it’s not that I don’t get enough food, but I stand in line and have to take time off from work.”

Don’t Cut the Basics!

Lee urged lawmakers: “Don’t cut anything. You have to have the basics to live. If I can’t afford to pay my rent, then jobs and other things are out of the question. If I don’t have the basics to find a doggone job... it’s all for nothing. I need a hand up, not a hand out.”

“Don’t cut the food banks,” Viola said. “With that assistance, I can do it. Through my job I get health care. With food bank assistance I can get gas to go to work.”

Lisa emphasized, “The most important thing that our society needs is food and medical. How are we supposed to eat if we don’t have food stamps or food banks?”

Bobbie Jo pointed out, “They’ve already taken so much over the last few years. You want society to move on but there’s no programs to help any of these people that need certain things. Food and medical are big things. They’ve cut so much they need to cut their own stuff. They’re clearly not struggling. Middle and lower class, we’re just aced out.”

“Don’t cut anything especially for lower and middle class people,” Loretta said. “They’re suffering already. Why make us suffer more?”

Carmen concluded, “The government really don’t care about us anymore. They have made that clear by outsourcing all our jobs. All the things that used to make this country great and it’s all gone. We have people going out there to fight and it’s for what? Not for making America better but to make rich people richer. They’re doing everything they can to downgrade and destroy America. We need to teach our children to get out of this box they’re trying to keep us in.”

PIERCE COUNTY:

Residents with incomes at or below 200% Federal Poverty Level (2011): 30% (241,513)

Unemployment rate (Aug. 2012): 9.1%

Schoolchildren eligible for free and reduced-price meals (Oct. 2012, Tacoma School District): 63% (18,554)

WIC total clients (2010): 42,635

Percent of population on Social Security (2011): 16% (127,255)

Total persons served, June 2012:
- Basic Food (food stamps): 147,699
- Medical assistance: 174,033
- TANF cash assistance: 18,982

Monthly income needed for self-sufficiency: $4,347

Self-Sufficiency Standard: The graph shows federal poverty level compared to the income needed to provide basic needs for a family of four in this county.
Population: Kettle Falls—1,593; Stevens County—43,496

Kettle Falls

With forested hills and the Roosevelt Lake portion of the Columbia River as their backdrop, Kettle Falls area residents portrayed lives of hard-strapped survival and resourcefulness. While the more ample resources of Spokane are more than 80 miles away, these senior citizens, parents, and underemployed people did their best with what was available.

Accessing affordable food, transportation and jobs is a challenge in most rural areas of Washington. Stan, a new resident of the area, said, “If it wasn’t for USDA and Rural Resources, I’d be out on the street.” Others in the group were grateful to the food banks, and turned to Rural Resources for their transportation program, energy assistance, and referrals for housing and jobs.

Rural Homelessness

Stan, who suffered a stroke, a shoulder injury and is diabetic, said he can’t complain: “I don’t consider myself in a bad situation; I’ve got a roof over my head. I know folks in sleeping bags, they lost their jobs, that’s the number one problem. I was living on the street, asked for help with a hotel until I could find some place to live, but they said I make too much money,” he continued. “If I’m making so much money, why am I so damn broke?” While he now gets Social Security Disability, Stan doesn’t have medical insurance and pays his prescriptions out of pocket.

Seven other members of the focus group had been homeless as well. Betty, a soft-spoken grandmother, said when that happened to her, “We put all our money in bologna and bread. They couldn’t send me out of here because I didn’t have relatives anywhere else.”

Can’t Get Enough Work Hours

“Our economy here, the logging mills are closing. There just aren’t jobs,” said Lori, a working mother of two. “I appreciate the food bank. I used to be on the other side of the counter, and now I’m on this side of the counter.” Those who were employed had trouble getting enough work hours. Ulla said her company required working 86 hours a month to get health insurance. “Every time I get close to that 86 hours a month with enough clients, they cut your clients so you can’t get health insurance. I’m fighting a losing battle,” she said. Her doctor says she shouldn’t be working due to her pulmonary condition, but she can’t afford to not work. She was cut off TANF when she reached the 60 month limit, so she moved in with her grown daughter. “They cut my food stamps from $150 per month to $16 a month. If you’re not on Social Security, you can’t get any help. There’s nothing.”

Another woman with the same company said, “I got my first client after being with the program for a year, and I get only 19 hours per month. As a parent, everyone has insurance except me. I’m the primary caregiver, the breadwinner.”

Food Stamps Not Enough to Get By

The majority of the participants received some SNAP or food stamp benefits, although several got only the minimum $16 per month. With his $16, Stan said, “Once a month I get a treat—ground beef.”

Kris said, “When my daughter-in-law and her children were living with me, we had a larger amount of food stamps for her kids, but they moved out and I applied and I got $16. I get eggs and milk for one week.”

Lura said if she depended on food stamps alone, “you could not get by. Mine come out to $3 a day.” Ulla wants the food stamp program to consider net income instead of gross income in determining eligibility and benefit levels.

Living with her husband and depending on his veteran’s benefits and Social Security Disability, Kris felt caught in a trap: “I was not allowed to work. They would take dollar for dollar off of his pension.”

Now, Kris and her husband have their disabled 29-year-old son living with them. He is not eligible for disability benefits, yet has a painful medical condition that they are told is inoperable. “You just learn to live on next to nothing,” she sighed.

Mary and Richard had their benefits
“I’m fortunate, I drive a school bus but had to cut back and now only get 4.75 hours a day. I don’t generate enough hours to get benefits. If I want insurance it’s atrocious—$690 per month for the premium and I only bring home $1000 a month.” Lori pays $300 out of her $1,000 a month paycheck for fuel to get to work. She doesn’t buy the medical insurance. “I live in a camper in the woods. I have no utilities and no water. I have to come to the food bank to survive, and I’m working,” she emphasized.

cut from $153 to $62 after a review last year. They weren’t informed why they were cut, but got a letter that they could appeal. Leeya’s benefits went from $401 to $248; she also didn’t understand why she was cut.

**Getting by with Less**

In the midst of these challenges, several participants had advice for getting by with less. Lura, who raised six children, said she learned to live cheaply. As a farm family, they would preserve food by canning and stock up. “I practice that all the time. I know how to live cheap which is a plus for me. People with really big families now don’t have the options that I have. In the winter it’s hard to survive here. Snow piles up past our windows.”

Ulla spends a lot of time with her family. “We eat meals together. Mom, little brother, sister, we take turns who’ll cook, and on paydays we share.”

Leeya, who has lived in the area for almost 50 years, grows her own garden. She freezes food and saves seeds to plant for the next year. Leeya and others reported eating a lot of soups, stews, rice and beans. She said it is extra hard to help her kids and grandkids when school is out; school meals help her stretch her food stamps for the month.

**Can’t Handle More Cuts**

Gary, who had recently become disabled, said, “The hardest part about it all is the depression. You have to settle for what you’re getting; we have to take a back seat and it’s hard on me to sit in the back and take it, but what else can you do? You’re trying to keep a roof over your head and food in your belly. Any disaster happens, and we’re going to be lost.”

Along with others, Betty felt strongly about preserving the food stamp program: “Don’t cut any more. Everybody is just barely getting along now. If they keep on cutting, it will get a lot worse.”

Dan agreed, “Don’t lower it, raise it back up. People are just getting by on $16 a month.”

Stan urged, “Government should start helping people who can’t help themselves.”

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**STEVENS COUNTY:**

| Residents with incomes at or below 200% Federal Poverty Level (2011) | 40% (17,316) |
| Unemployment rate (Aug. 2012) | 11.2% |
| Schoolchildren eligible for free and reduced-price meals (Oct. 2012, Kettle Falls School District) | 59% (425) |
| WIC total clients (2010) | 1,683 |
| Percent of population on Social Security (2011) | 26% (11,110) |

**Total persons served, June 2012:**
- Basic Food (food stamps) | 9,765
- Medical assistance | 12,218
- TANF cash assistance | 948

**Monthly income needed for self-sufficiency: $3,304**

Self-Sufficiency Standard: The graph shows federal poverty level compared to the income needed to provide basic needs for a family of four in this county.
Population: Colfax—2,839; Whitman County—45,077

Colfax

Our Colfax focus group participants, most over age 60, were strong examples of retirees in a farming area still actively engaged in their community. Most volunteered or gave back in some way to the food bank or other services in town. Valerie, a relative newcomer in the last decade, said, “We have a 2,800 person family in this town.” She and others cited many examples of generosity in their community: The manager at Rosauer’s personally delivered food to one of them when they were sick, and provides other corporate giving and special sales as the only grocery store in town. When the food bank shelves were empty last year, the broader community responded and filled them up again.

Several told stories of sheltering extended family members who were homeless, or providing rides and referrals for each other, sometimes at a cost to themselves. Allene replied, “That’s the way I’ve always been wired, to help people.”

All shared similar concerns for other people in their community, especially younger people with children who don’t access the food bank. “I remember being a hungry kid. When I see a kid in line I just want to get out of line and let him have the food,” Jane said.

Struggling on Fixed Income

In the midst of a generous community, each person had stories of struggling to survive on a fixed income. “All of us who got our 3.6 percent Social Security increase then also got a cut in our food stamps. I’m allowed $3 a day for food,” Valerie said. “Anything they give with this hand, they take away the same amount or more with the other hand.” Valerie continued, “When the top of the top one percent make hundreds of millions in income and they want to take from us, that’s wrong! We all paid into Social Security, we can’t help if we get disabled and old!"

“Older years are golden years—baloney!” Sharon exclaimed.

“What they’re saying on the radio, seniors are breaking the economy for Medicare,” Jane added. “If I could, I’d go out to work. I want to go to work. I’ve never asked for anything, don’t want to ask for anything! I always told myself that if I can’t get it for myself then I won’t have it.”

High Medical Costs

Several spoke of the difficulty in accessing the medical care they needed, with one clinic, five doctors and four nurse practitioners in town. “I get both Medicare and Medicaid, and I’m entitled to nothing. If you need to go to the hospital in Spokane, you won’t get there. They won’t give you a ride or a cab voucher,” Valerie said. “I had to borrow $1,350 to get new dentures. I made six trips to the dentist to get dentures that don’t fit, that make my mouth bleed. So I can’t wear my dentures, but I still owe all my friends who helped me get the $1,350. With my glasses, Medicaid paid for the exam but I had to pay for my glasses.”

Charlotte told her story: “I was paying for my own medicine and I only got $11 in food stamps. Back then my doctor asked me, ‘How do you pay for groceries?’ I said, ‘A lot of Top Ramen.’” Now she has Medicare but has trouble navigating which of her prescriptions are covered and which are not.

“The prescriptions that are really expensive are the ones I need the most,” Lee said. Gary takes his medication only because his doctor gave him some samples. Jane’s prescriptions cost $100 of her $600 per month income. “Everything goes up, up, up, but our Social Security doesn’t go up. I thought to myself what would happen if I don’t take my meds. Doctors say I’d die, but if I don’t have to buy them, I could buy food.”

“Food is the last thing we think about buying,” Jane said with frustration. “I’m not taking my blood pressure medicine because I can’t afford it.”
Valerie has two artificial heart valves and breathing difficulties and lives in Section 8 housing. She is supported by Social Security, Medicare and food stamps, “mixed all together in a big pot and coming up short,” and suggested to elected officials: “I would challenge as many of them brave enough to live on $90 worth of food stamps for one month and products from a food bank and nothing else—no outside lunches, breakfasts, dinners, snacks. They should have to live on it, they should have to walk to wherever it is that the food bank is, or find a neighbor to drive them. Maybe they’d know what it’s like. We, all of us in this county, worked a lifetime and today we can’t survive.”

Transportation to Services

“To go from downtown up the hill for most medical services is beyond what most seniors can do,” Valerie explained. She added that there are transportation services available: “You call two business days in advance and go to the closest provider, regardless of who your doctor is. If you don’t, you get no ride. People like me, on my $700 a month, have a car. I have to pay the gas and insurance on that car and I am the wheels for five people. A lot of people don’t drive. They need help.”

Lee, who for a year lived homeless with four kids and a cat in her station wagon, no longer drives, but her friend Charlotte helps when she can. “911 picks me up off the sidewalk every now and then. If I get the least bit tired, I can’t get home.”

No Cuts to Senior Programs!

Even those participants who had been quiet during the group spoke emphatically about the programs they would like government leaders to protect. “I’m just concerned about Social Security being cut back,” Sharon said. “I just retired. That’s not fair. I worked all my life for that Social Security.”

Charlotte believed seniors should be able to get glasses, dental and hearing coverage and not pay out of pocket for it. “I’ve got dollar store reading glasses because I can’t afford my prescription so I’m ruining my eyes. We lost the dentist in Colfax that wouldn’t charge.” She had to pay $128 for a cleaning to be free of dental infection before she could have shoulder surgery.

Thinking of her children raising their own, Allene was also concerned about cuts to TANF12c: “It seems like when they’re just starting to get ahead, wham! They cut them back again.”

Jane, thinking of her husband, said: “I don’t like seeing cuts taken from our wounded veterans and their families. That’s a slap in the face. There should be more help for them. They’ve been to hell and come back.”

Monthly income needed for self-sufficiency: $3,542

Self-Sufficiency Standard13: The graph shows federal poverty level compared to the income needed to provide basic needs for a family of four in this county.
Population: Snohomish—9,210; Snohomish County—722,400

Snohomish

Our Snohomish group participants included parents, students, senior citizens, veterans, small-business owners, and able-bodied men and women looking for work. They spoke with gratitude for the extra effort their food bank manager offers to help them.

Chris said she is grateful for what the food bank offers: “Meat, basic food. But at the end of the month, when your income is gone, when you’re on a fixed income, this tides you over a little bit.”

Feeding Children First

Jaime works in a school cafeteria, feeding other peoples’ children during the school year, but struggles to feed her own. “Six hours a day is considered full time. I finally worked my way up to full time. When school is out during the summer, our income gets cut in half.” She receives unemployment compensation during the summer, but still it’s hard.

Jaime takes pride in her work, talking about the positive changes that have been made in school nutrition and choices of food offered to students. “For some kids that’s their only meal, at school, so it’s important work,” she said.

Pam, a high school student attending the group with her mom, enjoys school meals. “It’s healthier. It’s good they have different choices each week.”

Justin said for his family, the holidays are the most difficult. “You’ve got to get extras for your children, and you worry about what you’re going to put on the table for Christmas. The whole month is stressful. All your finances are limited, going towards your children. And as everyone says, prices are going up, gas, but your pay isn’t going up too.”

“I’m in construction. I do handyman work and that’s what’s keeping me going really. Construction is up and down, touch and go right now,” Justin said.

Military Veterans Struggle

Jack, a military veteran, found himself in the same work predicament. “I do restoration work. Started out doing excavating, hauling and clean up. I was busy six to seven days a week. I was always busy, never had enough time to do everything. Now I get four to five phone calls a month.” Scott, also a veteran and a single father of two teenage daughters, owns a real estate appraisal business: “The economy hit me real hard. When real estate went down it hurt me a lot. My income has gone down so much, I have to sell stuff.”

Larry was homeless when he spoke with us and in the process of getting qualified for housing assistance through the Veteran’s Administration. He hoped to find a place before the surgery he needs for his spinal injury and shoulder reconstruction. “I get some help from the VA. I spent a lot of time down there so I’m in different programs they’ve got. But it’s all the way down in Seattle.”

“My income changes every year. With my spinal injury I can’t sit or stand for very long. I do income taxes here in town. When I’m working, I come to the food bank and senior citizen centers,” he said.

Need SNAP, Housing Supports

Half of sixteen people in the group received food stamps; of those, half get the minimum $16 per month. The others in the group applied, but earn just a little too much to qualify. Scott said he didn’t qualify because “our house is paid off and it counts as income.”

One woman received a notice that she qualified, but her benefit was $0. “There’s this space in the middle where you make too much but you can’t afford a lot,” she said.

Michael, who waited for two years to get into subsidized housing, said that sometimes he feels punished for things he’s accomplished in his life; for example, when he got a small cost of living adjustment in his railroad retirement, his rent went up the same amount.

Several group members felt that high

Joan lives in senior housing, gets $16 a month in food stamps, and can eat for $4 per meal at the senior center near her house. She proudly showed the group her senior farmers market voucher book with $40 for the summer. “In early summer, they give them to you in different produce markets where things are grown locally.”
Justin, a father of three who along with his wife is just getting back on his feet after homelessness and unemployment, said: “My family gets a limited amount of food stamps with five people to feed. The amount in food stamps isn’t enough to feed our family every month.” He and his wife practice “extreme couponing” to make dollars stretch.

utilities’ costs had a large impact on their household budgets. Justin said, “They could lower our water bill so we can afford our food. Sewer and garbage is $900 a month.”

Worried about the Future
Joan said emphatically, “Don’t cut Social Security or then I’ll be homeless too!”

Chris added, “I think a lot of us, that’s what we live on so we can’t afford a cut.”

Vickie, who has seen her Disability Lifeline benefit cut over the past year, said, “They shouldn’t cut Social Security even though I haven’t gotten mine yet. They shouldn’t think we can live on $197 a month. I was at $329. It was acceptable. At least I could pay rent somewhere.”

There was lively consensus that those in charge of government and corporations needed to take their own pay cuts. Justin said, “The rest of us are suffering and we’re paying bills. They don’t have to worry about food, medicine, putting gifts under the Christmas tree. They go on vacations around the world. They don’t have to worry.”

Jack said, “Raise income taxes for the rich. Go drive around and look at the wealth in this country, it’s overwhelming.”

Larry drew on his tax preparation experience to point out a need for tax rates to be fairer, especially for tax payers in higher income brackets to pay more: “Like we in this room average 12% to 13% that we pay out in income taxes. They’re supposed to be paying 35%, but they actually pay about 7%.”

“Make it fair for everybody,” Cindy pleaded. “It doesn’t matter if you’re born in this country or you migrate to this country. Everything should be fair for everybody.”

Silvia, mom of two teenage daughters in the group, said, “We don’t want any more discrimination.” Her daughter Pam saw the need for government subsidized scholarships: “Kids want to study, but there isn’t enough. They want to apply. They want to go to college, but they can’t.”

Sheyla, Pam’s sister, urged, “More scholarships, because that’s where the future begins.”

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**SNOHOMISH COUNTY:**

- Residents with incomes at or below 200% Federal Poverty Level (2011)³
  - 24% (173,642)

- Unemployment rate (Aug. 2012)⁴
  - 8.3%

- Schoolchildren eligible for free and reduced-price meals (Oct. 2012, Snohomish School District)⁵
  - 20% (2,045)

- WIC total clients (2010)⁶
  - 26,330

- Percent of population on Social Security (2011)⁷
  - 14% (101,425)

**Total persons served, June 2012:**
- Basic Food (food stamps)¹²a
  - 96,540
- Medical assistance¹²b
  - 129,635
- TANF cash assistance¹²c
  - 9,432

**Monthly income needed for self-sufficiency: $4,782**

Self-Sufficiency Standard¹³: The graph shows federal poverty level compared to the income needed to provide basic needs for a family of four in this county.
Our focus group participants may hail from different parts of our state and represent a myriad of experiences and backgrounds, but they tell a common story. Their story is the struggle of Washingtonians who work hard to help their families attain self-sufficiency but find themselves set further back from attaining that goal. One major cause of these setbacks is a lack of jobs paying wages that cover a family’s basic needs. At the same time, the need to balance budgets in the face of revenue shortfalls has resulted in the chopping away of important services that help stretch household budgets until gainful employment can be obtained. These setbacks are a disservice to these individuals who have worked hard but lost jobs and savings due to our struggling economy, and it is also a disservice to our state’s and our nation’s history of investing in services that help low-income families get back on their feet and thrive.

We can return to the path of investing in the services that help make strong families. The first step is to listen to these individuals and families’ stories, struggles and suggestions for how we can better meet their needs. You’ve now read their stories in the preceding pages. With their advice and experiences in mind, we offer the following recommendations for investing in their wellbeing and journey to self-sufficiency.

**Protect SNAP/Basic Food and State Food Assistance Program**

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly food stamps, called Basic Food in Washington) is and should remain the first line of defense against hunger. **At the federal level, we urge support for a five-year Farm Bill that does not cut SNAP benefits.** SNAP has been shown to have an impact on the prevalence, depth and severity of poverty.\(^\text{14}\) The majority of our focus group participants spoke to the key importance of this benefit to their families, allowing them to purchase food before coming to emergency food providers. The program is designed to expand and contract based on need and in response to economic conditions. SNAP also has a multiplier effect—every dollar of SNAP benefits generates $1.79 in local economic activity.\(^\text{15}\)

**At the state level, funding for the State Food Assistance Program (SFA) needs to be restored.** This program was cut by 50% in 2012, leaving 11,000 households of legal, documented immigrants with less than $2 per person per day in benefits and only the emergency food system to put food on their tables. Restoring these benefits helps 14,000 children in those households have more food security.

**Preserve Other Effective Nutrition Assistance Programs**

We initially met our focus group participants because they sought help at a food bank. During the groups, they also talked about other nutrition programs they use to avoid hunger. Drawing from our extensive and long-standing experience in emergency food provision, we make the following recommendations:

**Increase state funding for Emergency Food Assistance Program (EFAP).** EFAP helps Washington food banks keep their shelves stocked, their lights on, and their doors open. Food banks statewide are serving 35% more clients since 2008, but are experiencing dwindling cash and food donations from the private sector and have not seen an increase in state support. An additional investment will help food banks better meet the needs of clients, ensuring more adequate amounts of nutritious food.

**The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) at the federal level needs protection in the Farm Bill.** It provides important USDA food resources to emergency food programs.

**Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program is at risk for automatic discretionary spending cuts.** It provides essential support to low income families with children under five years old to access nutritious food that helps children thrive.

**Strengthen and maintain child nutrition programs in schools, child care settings and during summer.** Children need access to affordable nutritious food year round.
When school is out for weekends, summer and seasonal breaks, families that struggle with hunger are at a loss for feeding their kids who can no longer count on school meals for at least one regular meal each day.

The Farmers Market Nutrition Program for WIC and Seniors needs protection. Several of our focus group participants said their voucher provided much-needed access to fresh produce at their local farmers markets.

Keep Our Safety Net Intact

All of our focus group participants highlighted the importance of safety net programs to meet the basic needs of their households. You’ve heard in these pages that people make hard choices between eating and paying rent, between nutrition and healthcare. They also spoke to the insecurity of recent years as that safety net has been threatened by budget cuts.

We know it takes an interwoven system of services to build a base from which low-income people can work their way out of poverty. A balanced budget should not be achieved on the backs of hungry and low income people by cutting our safety net. Savings need to be found elsewhere in nonessential services.

Protect Social Security and Medicare.

We talked to many senior citizens this year, and they were passionate about their rights and need for Social Security benefits and Medicare.

Protect Medicaid, Unemployment, TANF benefits, Working Connections child care subsidies, and other programs for low income Washington families in need.

Honor our veterans by protecting Veterans Administration services from cuts. The veterans we spoke with rely on VA services for affordable, quality medical care and help with transportation and housing. We cannot turn our backs on those who sacrificed so much for our protection.

Provide affordable transportation services that help low-income seniors, people with disabilities and families with young children access critical services.

Improve transparency and communication in administration of safety net programs, so those needing benefits better understand eligibility guidelines and appeals processes.

Address Root Causes of Poverty to End Hunger

Beyond nutrition and safety net programs, what would make a difference?

Access to Affordable Health Care.

Participants spoke at length about how catastrophic or chronic illness, lack of dental care, and high cost of prescription drugs impacted them. We have an opportunity to expand Medicaid services through the federal Affordable Care Act to raise income eligibility levels and provide coverage to working families who cannot afford to buy their own health insurance.

Jobs that pay a living wage. As you read in our report, many individuals were working one or more jobs, but still could not meet their basic needs. Increasing income potential and self-sufficiency for low-income households is key. Earned wages that cover basic needs mean that more families will be able to spend money on goods and services that will help boost our struggling economy.

More fairness in state and federal tax systems. Our focus group participants called for a tax system that is more fair, as they, low-income Washingtonians, cannot afford more in taxes.

At Northwest Harvest, we combine our hands-on, charitable work of distributing nutritious food to families in need with advocacy. We support strong public policies and smart investment of public funds in services that strengthen families by lifting them out of poverty. We hope you will join us in our fight to eliminate hunger by advocating for the protection and strengthening of programs and services that help low income families meet their basic needs. These families are working hard to find their own way out of poverty; they need the help of both private charity and our public safety net to move toward their dreams of self-sufficiency.

To find out more about our advocacy work, contact Public Policy Manager Christina Wong: 206.923.7465; christinaw@northwestharvest.org.
Process

Focus groups were held in July and August 2012 at five locations across the state, representing rural, urban, and suburban areas: Colfax, Kettle Falls, Snohomish, Southeast Tacoma, and White Salmon. Food bank staff recruited a total of 62 participants representing a range of ages and life circumstances who were using food bank services. Staff informed all participants that the group was not a requirement of receiving food. Northwest Harvest paid participants $20 for attending the two-hour focus group and offered childcare reimbursement and snacks during the session. Northwest Harvest staff members conducted the groups, following a transcript of 45 questions we ask each year. Some participants chose to remain anonymous; those whose photos and names appear here have given informed consent.

Poverty Measures

The following are definitions of terms and data included in the report:

Self-Sufficiency Standard\(^\text{13}\) Included for each community is a graph of a self-sufficiency standard for the geographic area showing what is needed for a family of four to adequately support themselves (specifically, two adults, one pre-school and one school-aged child). The guidelines used come from The Self-Sufficiency Standard for Washington State, developed by Dr. Diana Pearce of the University of Washington and updated in 2011. Dr. Pearce developed a methodology for calculating the costs of basic necessities for families of different sizes in different areas of the state. The graphs demonstrate that families above the official poverty guideline fall far short of having the resources necessary to meet their basic needs.

100% of federal poverty\(^\text{16}\) The official measure of poverty in the U.S. was developed in 1963, based on the cost of a basic food diet for a household, multiplied by three to estimate that household’s expenses. Experts believe the current poverty measure is flawed because of changes in family expenses over the past four decades, with the costs of housing, health care and childcare taking a significantly larger share of a household budget.

In November of 2012, the U.S. Census Bureau released the Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM)\(^\text{17}\) This measure takes into consideration the costs of food, housing,
utilities and clothing. It also takes into consideration governmental non-cash benefits, such as food stamps, and is adjusted according to regional differences in cost of living. This SPM measure finds 49.7 million poor people in 2011 in the U.S., or 3.1 million more than the official definition of poverty.

The Supplemental Poverty Measure does not replace the official poverty measure, which is still used to determine eligibility for benefits like Medicaid, Medicare, and the federal food stamp program called SNAP. Since the supplemental measure has not been adopted as the official federal measure of poverty, we continue to use the federal poverty thresholds and compare it to the Self Sufficiency Standard to portray poverty in the counties that were visited for this year’s focus group report.

200% of federal poverty This measure of income more closely indicates what is needed for self-sufficiency. In two of the five counties portrayed here, the monthly self-sufficiency income needed exceeds 200%: 226% in west Pierce County, and 249% in west Snohomish County. The number of families under 200% of poverty is therefore an underestimate of the number of families at risk of food insecurity due to inadequate financial resources.

"The food bank is good and everything, but in my situation, I have low income, no children so it’s hard to get medical, so I have to look around for resources. I go to a homeless clinic, that’s the best way to do it. That’s where I go for my medical and dental now and it’s working out. I’m grateful for that. Don’t cut low cost community clinics.”
In academic year 2011-12, 467,272 (46%) of schoolchildren in Washington were eligible to receive subsidized meals. Focus group participants attested to the critical role these school meals play in their children’s lives.


This number does not count those who have given up looking for work, those who are underemployed, or those who have been unable to find work for so long that they have reached the maximum time limit for receiving unemployment insurance. We use August 2012 figures representing available data closest to the focus group timeframe.


The federally-funded National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program provide nutritionally-balanced free or reduced-price meals to children in schools.


The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) is a preventive health and nutrition program that provides short-term assistance to young families at risk of nutrition-related health problems to promote optimal growth and development. In 2010, half of all infants born in Washington received WIC benefits, and more than 316,000 women, infants and children participated in the program. WIC faces significant budget cuts in the federal deficit reduction negotiations process.
11 U.S. Social Security Administration, Office of Retirement and Disability Policy. OASDI Beneficiaries by State and County, 2011. [http://www.ssa.gov/policy/docs/statcomps/oasdi_sc/2011/oasdi_sc11.pdf](http://www.ssa.gov/policy/docs/statcomps/oasdi_sc/2011/oasdi_sc11.pdf) These data include those receiving Social Security retirement, survivor, and disability benefits. These are entitlement programs, meaning that recipients meet eligibility criteria to receive government benefits or services that were created by federal legislation. A large percentage of focus group participants rely on this fixed income. In January 2012, benefits increased by 3.6% due to the first cost of living adjustment since 2009.


12a [http://www.dshs.wa.gov/pdf/main/briefingbook/2012basic_food_assistance.pdf](http://www.dshs.wa.gov/pdf/main/briefingbook/2012basic_food_assistance.pdf) In Washington State the food stamp program is called Basic Food; nationally, it is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). The program provides an electronic benefits transfer (EBT) card to participants to be used for food purchases like a debit card. SNAP benefits are the most important domestic food assistance program. In June 2012 in our state, 1,121,480 people participated in the program, 39% of them children.

12b [http://www.dshs.wa.gov/pdf/main/briefingbook/2012medical_assistance.pdf](http://www.dshs.wa.gov/pdf/main/briefingbook/2012medical_assistance.pdf) The Medical Assistance data we cite here includes all coverage groups and the numerous Medicaid programs available, both state and federally funded. In 2012, there was a 20.7% increase over FY 2011 in the monthly average of cases.

12c [http://www.dshs.wa.gov/pdf/main/briefingbook/2012tanf_workfirst.pdf](http://www.dshs.wa.gov/pdf/main/briefingbook/2012tanf_workfirst.pdf) Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)/WorkFirst provides cash assistance to low-income families with children while they strive to become self-sufficient. The average monthly payment in 2012 was $373.22 ($45.03 less than the average payment in 2011).


“They’ll give you another number and you call them and they just can’t help you. If you don’t have children you don’t get help. Me and my husband are getting evicted and we called the churches, we called everyone and because we don’t have children we can’t get help.”