Focus on Food Security:
For the Health of Our Communities
Northwest Harvest’s Focus Group Report 2014

Feeding our neighbors in need statewide through a network of more than 360 food banks, meal programs and high-need schools.
**Focus on Food Security: For the Health of Our Communities**

This Focus on Food Security report is a summary of five focus groups held by Northwest Harvest at emergency food programs in five counties of Washington state: Spokane, Mason, Cowlitz, south King and Kittitas.

The purpose of these focus groups is to hear directly from those affected by hunger. Each year we gather food bank and meal program clients from across the state and ask the same set of questions. Their responses provide snapshots of what hunger looks and feels like in their lives as well as within their communities.

The participants’ stories and experiences also help shape our advocacy efforts to eliminate hunger. This year, we heard their strong opinions about how cuts to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly called food stamps) impact their lives and health. These cuts to state and federal programs come at a time when we know the need is still high. Hunger in Washington has doubled since 2008.

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 public funding. With them, we advocate for public policies that would make ample nutritious food available to everyone in Washington.

Jeana, a focus group participant from Deer Park, shared her own vision of a healthier future beyond hunger: “When we prosper, everyone prospers,” she said.

We thank all the focus group participants who were willing to share stories of their lives, their struggles and their courage.

We commit ourselves to working with you to make a better future possible.

Shelley Rotondo, Chief Executive Officer

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

Northwest Harvest extends its gratitude to the following food programs, their staff and volunteers for assistance with the focus groups: JoAnn Rushton, HopeSource Food Bank, Cle Elum; Susan Peterson, Greenhouse Community Center, Deer Park; Lynn Coffman, North Mason Coalition of Churches and Community, Belfair; Bev Jones, North Gate City Church Food Bank, Kelso; Audrey Zemke and Rick Jump, White Center Food Bank, Seattle.

We also thank these organizations for use of meeting space: Roslyn Library and City Council Chambers, Greenhouse Community Center, Belfair Community Baptist Church, North Gate City Church, and Seola Gardens Community Center.

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Access previous years’ reports at:
northwestharvest.org/Focus-on-Food-Security

Listen to participants tell their stories at: northwestharvest.org/Focus-on-Food-Security-Stories
Our focus group project this year was informed by 86 food bank and meal program clients across the state who shared their stories of how hunger and poverty impact their lives. You will read in the pages that follow stories of struggle and resilience, isolation and community, as well as stories of people new to food banks and those who have survived for years through food bank generosity.

We heard some common themes from participants:

- **Devastating change can happen fast.** One woman’s husband went from earning $1,500 a week to nothing. Unexpected medical emergencies or serious illness drain household budgets.

- **Many were working and still couldn’t make ends meet.** Some participants worked full-time and couldn’t afford to feed their households.

- **Public benefits are essential, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, called Basic Food in Washington, formerly food stamps) and heating/utilities assistance.**

- **People told us that as soon as they take one step forward, they get knocked two steps back.** For some, a small cost-of-living raise in Social Security significantly reduced food stamp benefits.

In 2013, Washington state was ranked 15th hungriest state in the nation.¹ And since that ranking, emergency food program clients have experienced additional cuts to SNAP, as well as threats by Congress to cut more. Jeana’s voice from Deer Park² resonated strongly for us this year as she spoke not only of the immediate impact of cuts in her own life, but about the long-term impact of cuts on a community’s well-being. We share her vision with you, and invite you to consider the costs of poverty and food insecurity to your own community:

“I want to let you know that we are hard-working people and I don’t feel a sense of entitlement, though I do feel that too much has been taken away to allow a healthy society. And in a healthy society, if they want to keep children from growing up and acting out, ending up in jail; if they want to have productive citizens who are educated and contributing; then having healthy citizens who are well-fed, with a safe place to sleep and lay down your head, with education that helps you to understand the world around you and respond in a healthy way—then you need to start putting the money into the people. And I really encourage the legislature to step back in and help rebuild America.”

Rebuilding America is what President Johnson’s War on Poverty set out to do 50 years ago. It put in place a government safety net that made substantial progress toward creating safer, healthier, more equitable communities. We’ve seen that safety net fraying in recent years, and we’ve seen private charities doubling their efforts to protect the most vulnerable citizens. But these programs are stretched to capacity, and need a strong public-private partnership to benefit communities.

As you read the feedback from each focus group please note that in each county’s data section, we highlight how many people have incomes of 200% of federal poverty level. We think that 200% is a better estimate than 100% of the poverty level when determining the financial resources needed to be self-sufficient. Please see our discussion of poverty measures on page 16.

We agree with Jeana that it will be a holistic approach that ends hunger. We join our efforts with other advocates such as Bread for the World. Their 2014 report Ending Hunger in America³ includes multiple approaches, including a jobs agenda, a stronger safety net, human capital development, and public-private partnerships to support community initiatives.

We invite you to read the stories of our participants highlighted in this report and decide what role you will play in making a healthier community for all. We share some of our own recommendations on page 14.
**DeerPark**

Deer Park participants were a resourceful group, many living in large, combined households to get by. They shared their knowledge of everything from complex state benefit requirements to tips for growing the best tomatoes.

Glen, who lives with seven other people, said, “If we didn’t have the food bank to help toward the end of the month or when we need help, we’d go hungry. We survive on whatever we can find.”

Jeana added, “I know a number of families who are working who can’t make it through the month.”

Lynn said the food bank helps a lot. “Being on fixed income I know how it is. My husband went from bringing home $1500 a week to nothing. It happened fast.”

“What happened to the middle class?” Rick asked.

For many in the group, high medical costs were the biggest drain on their household budgets. Rick lives on Social Security and a small pension from the company he used to work for. “I spend $400-500 per month just on my meds.” His wife has skin cancer and needs her prescriptions as well.

“By the 11th or 12th of the month, I’m broke.” Rick was concerned with the impact of budget cuts. “They cut my Medicare, I die. They’ve given me a death sentence.”

Jeana agreed, “Even if you’re relatively healthy, things happen and you don’t necessarily have the resources to cover the expenses. I broke a tooth just chewing. It’s a challenge to live without health insurance.”

There was shared concern about keeping their homes warm during cold winters. Many have what they called the “comfort plan” for apportioned payments through the year. Others had been told a new city ordinance requires landlords to include their utility costs in rent, but when tenants paid their own utilities it was cheaper.

SNAP benefits were essential for most of the participants. “It gets me my milk and eggs every month. I use them at the end of the month when things get low,” Lynn said. Larraine agreed, and uses them to get what she can’t get at the food bank, like meat and eggs, “whatever is cheap in the grocery store.”

“Sadly it’s more expensive to eat healthy these days,” said Chandra, mom to six children. “If we didn’t have food stamps we would starve. It provides our sole food for our house until just about the last week of the month. We’re really scraping the cupboards then.”

She has friends she buys in bulk with and then works together on meals for their children. “We work together as a community to feed our families.”

Melissa said her husband is a farmer, so they don’t have a steady income during the year. “We do use food stamps. I run a thrift store but I don’t make profit out of it. When people need a shirt I give them a shirt. When they need shoes I give them shoes.”

Shel, who is raising three foster children, noted, “SNAP eligibility based on the federal poverty line is still not enough—it’s starvation, it’s horrible.”

“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.”
Rick said when he got a $12 per month raise in Social Security this year, his food stamps were taken away. Glen responded, “They give with one hand then take away from the other.”

Glen was emphatic about protecting SNAP. “Don’t cut into our food stamps and government food programs for people who need the help. I want to see one congressman live like what we all live like for one week. See how they can do it.”

Jeana runs a family nonprofit that helps bone marrow donors. “I work and still can’t afford from the wages I make to feed myself and my family. The money raised is limited for what I can be paid. What I can earn is not enough to make a difference. Between the 15th and 20th we’re really looking through the cupboards.”

“I have concerns about legislation in Washington. I have a lot of concerns for families on food stamps,” she added.

Jeana spoke eloquently about the ripple effects of hunger and poverty on a community. “I’m going to be bold and say not only should they not cut social programs, but they really need to increase them. When you take care of people then we prosper. When we prosper, everyone prospers. The more they stranglehold us, the more we become an unhealthy society, the sicker the society is becoming. It really behooves everyone—everyone will benefit the healthier our society is. I mean emotionally, educationally, physically. We are not fed properly; we don’t have access to health care to care for our bodies. The healthier all of us are, the healthier our society will be.”

She has a positive vision of what will result. “We will give back in ways they can’t imagine in Washington. We won’t be struggling just to survive. If you ask everyone in this room, they will tell you about how we all give. This is a room full of people who all want to help but we are all struggling. I really believe the more you take care of the people who live with you in your community, the more the whole system will prosper.”

See Jeana’s video at: northwestharvest.org/Focus-on-Food-Security-Stories

**SPOKANE COUNTY:**

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<thead>
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<th>Parameter</th>
<th>Value</th>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>Total served, June 2012:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Basic Food (SNAP)</td>
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<td>Medical assistance</td>
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<td>TANF cash assistance</td>
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**Monthly income needed for self-sufficiency**: $4,025

Left bar of graph shows income for a family of four to meet basic needs in Spokane county.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Earnings - two full-time minimum wage workers</th>
<th>100% federal poverty level</th>
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<tr>
<td>Taxes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Misc.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Child Care</td>
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<td>Health Care</td>
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<td>Transp.</td>
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<td>Food</td>
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<tr>
<td>Housing</td>
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Residents with incomes at or below 200% Federal Poverty Level (2012): 34% (162,086)
“There are so many programs for kids,” said Rhea, mother of three. “The shortfall in North Mason is for those who don’t have kids.”

“My daughter is in Mason School District. I’m familiar with the backpack program, but not the box of food or anything else. I have begged for help from counselors. My daughter is struggling,” said Kelly, a single mother. “You wonder why you’re a gap in the system, why your daughter has to suffer.”

Kelly added that stocking food in the freezer helps. “Just whatever it is—to psychologically show a child that there’s food in that fridge.”

Stormy, mother of four, had another resourceful approach: “For fresh produce I have a friend who gets produce for her pigs. I pick through and take what isn’t rotten—$216 in food stamps doesn’t go far when you have three teenage boys.”

Almost everyone benefitted from the SNAP program, but at different levels.

Roseann feels fortunate, but needs to be strategic about how she shops. “I have big kids now. They’ll eat it all at once. I divide it up into four weeks and buy weekly. I have to do it that way.”

While extremely knowledgeable about resources and ways to juggle bills, Rhea still struggled to make ends meet. When her husband retired from the Navy and she quit her job due to illness, they went from sufficient income to $600 per month. She works part-time as an on-call firefighter; as a result her food stamps dropped from $400 to $26 a month.

“I got ill this winter, was diagnosed with cancer and got treatment,” she said. As a result she has $400 each month in medical bills. “I could die from cancer or pay my medical bills, but I have to feed my kids—$26 is a joke. I reapply every month.”

Stormy lost SNAP eligibility when her husband got accepted for veteran’s benefits. “We got a letter this month that our food stamps are getting cut off. We’re getting $100-something from V.A. and not getting $260 for food stamps.” She pleaded, “Don’t penalize me for trying to get out of poverty.”

Mitch said a similar thing happened to him. “I’ve been on disability since 2006.
For the last three years my food stamps have gone from $168 per month down to $68 per month because every year they give us a $27 [per month] cost of living increase on Social Security.”

Rachel said she and her husband are both in college and living on $1000 per month. “We get $16 per month in food stamps. Thank God for food banks.” She would like to see SNAP improved and available to college students. “I’m going to have to take student loans to pay for our food, adding to our debt long term.” “If they cut the food stamps anymore, the more they cut, the more we have to go to food banks.” Karrie added. “We weren’t using food banks when they were giving us the full amount of food stamps.”

“Once you’re in this position, you can’t get out. That’s the big issue that everyone here has,” said Lisa, who has adult children at home. “I want [elected officials] to pay more attention to what our kids need. Kids could grow up and move out, but they can’t if there’s nothing to lean on.”

See Stormy’s video at: northwestharvest.org/Focus-on-Food-Security-Stories

Mike called himself “both a military brat and retired military.” He was new to the social service system: “I didn’t know anything about these programs. I didn’t need anything until I got injured on the job then fired six days later last year. You go from military pay of $65,000-$75,000 a year to $15,000 in your retirement. Having one person out of work—it’s insane. We manage, but these programs are a godsend. We don’t qualify for food stamps, have been denied four times, even though I’ve been unemployed for the last year. Unemployment won’t give anything. Without these programs, I’d be in a huge hurt locker.”

He and his wife are raising two children and agreed with other parents in the group who were trying to be as resourceful as possible. “You stretch every dollar you have to make sure your kids get everything.”

Mike asked of service providers as well as policymakers: “Every circumstance means different needs and different help. When you offer a hand up—offer your hand, bring them up; they’ll do the same for someone else.”

MASON COUNTY:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Monthly income needed for self-sufficiency: $3,879</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Taxes</td>
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<td>Housing</td>
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<td>Earnings - two full-time minimum wage workers:</td>
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<td>$3,186</td>
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Left bar of graph shows income for a family of four to meet basic needs in Mason county.

Residents with incomes at or below 200% Federal Poverty Level (2012): 33% (20,035)
The people attending our Kelso focus group eagerly shared knowledge about resources in their community. Several were working as in-home caregivers and maximized their efforts for not only their own families but their clients as well.

John, who is diabetic and on a fixed income, advised, “Tighten down. Utilize every piece of food you can get.”

Patty offered advice for everything from preserving food to getting the best deal by comparing prices per ounce. “You do the best you can and hope the other stuff will take care of itself,” Betty shared.

Julie, who has a special diet for a medical issue, was grateful for the food bank’s help: “You have to make changes. I have to eat a high protein diet. That’s pretty expensive. So when I come here, and they have enough eggs to give you an 18-pack for a single person, that’s pretty amazing and you can stretch that out. When you’re really hungry, you’re just grateful for it.”

“I don’t normally have to come here, but my husband and I both just recently lost our jobs,” Trish admitted. “We usually make pretty good money. I’ve got three children that have needs, and it’s been crazy.”

Rene said summer is the hardest time, “when kids are home. I’m not providing just dinner—there’s breakfast and lunch, and there’s always extra kids at my house. I can’t say ‘Sorry, you can’t eat.’ I wouldn’t be able to do that without all the food banks.”

Ana Mariya said for her family the summer was hard too. “In the middle of the month, it’s a little difficult because the little kids just want to be in the refrigerator.”

“I’m a mother that doesn’t like it when we throw away our food. I only make the things I know my kids will eat so they won’t throw it away. I’m really strict on that part. I tell my son there are places where people don’t have any food to eat. And they even want a little of what we have,” said Ana Mariya.

Her young daughter, who was also serving as her translator, said she liked school meals. “I’m looking forward to going back to school.”

“The last week and a half of the month is when things get extremely tight. I need to get through until the first of the month when food stamps come in,” Larry said.

“You have to budget the food stamps, stretch them out to furthest extent to not completely run out,” John said.

Julie explained her struggles maintaining benefits: “I got $214 then within one month it dropped to $16. I still didn’t get an explanation. I was told I need to prove medical expenses. I don’t mind showing them, but it takes two to three weeks to work with my case worker. It doesn’t do me any good to get angry about it. That’s not getting me anywhere; it’ll slow me down in the system.”

“I’m on my third review for food stamps this year, but I only had one increase this year for my disability,” John said. “I don’t understand why we’re going through this so many times when our income isn’t changing?”

“We’re in the same situation,” Jennifer said. “My husband and I worked for the same company. We made great money then lost jobs within 10 days of each other. Five years later, we have grandkids living with us. We get $98 each month [in food stamps.] I’m thankful for it. But it’s a full-time job fighting to keep that $98.”

“I finally got insurance nine months
“When I first moved here I had a hard time,” Tracey said. “I moved to the apartments that I now manage. I choose to manage my own way. I give second chances—no good references, no application fee, bad rental history, mental illness—I rent to people like that. Those are the kind of tenants we’re looking for who need that start.”

As a landlord and grandmother, she was also the referral expert in the group. “I made it my point to search every corner. I like to share and want everyone to know.”

“If you have kids and they have friends, some of the parents aren’t feeding their kids at home,” so she said she ends up feeding all of them. “Especially summer when they’re home from school, outside playing. I have all my grandkids.”

Once she lost her food stamps for two months, due to missing paperwork she knew she had turned in. “I went without food for me and my grandkids for quite a while.”

Tracey was most concerned with saving these programs that she sees make a difference in peoples’ lives. “Places like the food banks. The energy assistance program helps a lot of people. Section 8 housing. A lot of people don’t think about the food banks—if you don’t have anything to eat, you don’t have the strength to do anything else.”

See Tracey’s video at: northwestharvest.org/Focus-on-Food-Security-Stories

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See Tracey’s video at: northwestharvest.org/Focus-on-Food-Security-Stories

ago,” Jennifer added. “I have cancer. We’ve got nothing. We’ve lost everything. It’s a vicious cycle.”

They have six children and two grandchildren in the home, including custody of an infant grandson. “We can’t afford the gas. We live out in the country. So we garden, pick and can food, and supplement with the food bank,” Jennifer said.

“I’m still working just to survive. I’m almost 70, and I’ve got heart trouble but I go on. Even at that rate, I am still technically homeless,” Martha said. “We just keep our heads up and keep on truckin’.”

“They make it to where it’s impossible to get ahead,” Deborah commented. “It’s just the way the system works. It gets worse before it ever gets better.”

“Residents with incomes at or below 200% Federal Poverty Level (2012): 34% (34,529)
White Center/ Seattle

The White Center group was a lively mix of English and Vietnamese speakers, many who had lived in the area for decades. Their lives overlapped as they met in line at the food bank.

All of the Vietnamese were senior citizens who sustained their households on Social Security, SNAP, and the food bank.

A. Tran spoke first through the translator: “I’m a senior. I go to the food bank two times a month. It’s not enough.”

“I’m retired right now,” Su explained. “Every month I have $450 to pay for home and other expenses, so I just have $30 to eat.” He wishes he could get more money from SNAP to have enough food.

Van Van responded, “I only get $100 something because of my income. Some people get less.”

“We depend on the government,” Van Van continued. “If the government gives money more then we take it; if giving less, then it’s less.”

Bui Hoa said those benefits helped her raise her children. “If food stamps get cut there will be more homeless on the street in our community.”

Willie Mae, a disabled senior who navigates food banks by bus, said she gets $18 in SNAP benefits. “The food stamps and the food bank run hand in hand, help to supplement your income so you can have the income to pay those other bills and live adequately. While they cut other areas, each person should have food.”

She did her best to get by with what was in the house: “When you have one of the staples, noodles or rice, you can make a pot. Throw in anything with the noodles to make a soup or mix anything in with the rice. You can have two starches for dinner—it’s filling, gets you to sleep.”

“I’m an old single lady—but a woman with children will be affected a lot,” Willie Mae said about SNAP cuts. “I don’t see how they can explain that, how they can justify that, when it comes to children who need nutrition at those young ages.”

“We have enough hard time to get up to what the average person makes. You just want to live,” Willie Mae said. “Society will do unscrupulous things for food.”

“There’s a lot of hungry people out there,” Roy added. “We need food stamps. Food banks only allow you to have so much food. At the end of the month, we’ll be short on food.”

“People will be hungry. They got to get something to eat,” Roy continued. “Cut the food stamps and a lot of people will be upset, really upset.”

“A lot of people have problems in the last week of the month,” Dora joined in. She doesn’t like it when food banks turn people away because they don’t live in the neighborhood served by the food bank. “Your stomach doesn’t have an address. You’re sending a hungry child to be hungry all over.”

“If you cut the food stamps, that’s one less meal in my kid’s mouth,” Pearl quietly added. “Don’t do it. You wouldn’t want your kids to go without a meal.”

See Willie Mae’s video at: northwestharvest.org/Focus-on-Food-Security-Stories
Joe explained what brings him to the food bank: “I got laid off last week and am having to use the system again. I have unemployment this time around, but it’s not near enough to cover bills. I don’t qualify this time around for food stamps; last year I did.”

Joe works construction, and was injured on the job in a three-story fall in 2011. He needed an operation, and at the same time his wife had an operation and has had serious health issues ever since. They lost health insurance after depleting their pension funds to pay for COBRA benefits.

“We found ourselves using the food bank system a lot. We had to move to housing we could afford.”

“We’re trying to get up to where we can still live a healthful life, but it’s hard. People have a grand life that can suddenly have a change due to health issues.”

They have two children they adopted 10 years ago from the foster system. “My son is 10. His sister just turned 14. He’s a big boy, comes home from school hungry all the time. He’s 127 pounds, playing tackle now. He eats an unbelievable amount of food.”

“He’s in that growing stage so right now it’s pretty tough. I have to tell him to ask his sister, mother, or me before he gets stuff out of fridge. There’s stuff set aside to make meals. He’ll go to practice then come home and still be hungry again.”

From his experience in government service, Joe wants elected officials to “cut unnecessary spending. But they’re looking in the wrong areas when they cut from people who really need help. Larger numbers of people will be homeless or hungry. It’s just a domino effect—people get depressed, hard to get out of depression. To punish those people is just wrong.”

stamps jeopardizes everything you worked for,” Samantha said.

Willie Mae suggested elected officials look elsewhere for budget cuts. “People get food stamps because they’re already at that low economic level and suffering. To take from them is outrageous!”

KING COUNTY:

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment (Aug. 2013)</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social Security recipients (2012)</td>
<td>13% (267,850)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Schoolchildren eligible for subsidized meals (Oct. 2013, Highline School District)</td>
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<td>WIC recipients (2010)</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Basic Food (SNAP)9a</td>
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<td>- Medical assistance9b</td>
<td>313,781</td>
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<tr>
<td>- TANF cash assistance9c</td>
<td>26,007</td>
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**Monthly income needed for self-sufficiency10:** $5,215

Left bar of graph shows income for a family of four to meet basic needs in King county.

Residents with incomes at or below 200% Federal Poverty Level (2012)13 | 25% (502,328)
Cle Elum
Participants at our group held in Roslyn had moved to the area from across the country, and lived along the I-90 corridor, mostly near Cle Elum.

The Cle Elum area was severely impacted by wildfires during the past two summers, and for the focus group participants, the tangible fire threat was also a metaphor for other crises they faced. Pete, a small business owner, captured this sentiment when he said, “You just have to put out the biggest fire next.”

Bruce has lived in the area for nine years, and retired from being a boilermaker in the shipyards for 35 years. He went back to school in Ellensburg and got his nurse’s aide license, working in a nursing home, an adult family home and then for a private client. He said he has depended on the food bank every year.

“If it wasn’t for the food banks I wouldn’t survive here. Summer is great, lots of fresh vegetables and stuff. Winter time gets a little tight. That’s why I like soups so much—it’s so cold here, they’re great and hearty,” he said.

Dianna agreed that summer was good: “Right now, the food bank is bursting with fresh goodness. Fall too, because the harvest comes in. They get a lot of apples. They rotate year round because they have to be in season, like cherries and plums right now, in fall it’ll be squash. When stuff is in season, I take from the food bank and process it and freeze it so it’ll last longer.”

Jean, a senior who has lived in the area for 35 years, gets by with the help of her son. “Ryan takes care of all the groceries for us. He’s been a chef before so he knows how to put things together.”

Ryan responded, “It’s just the two of us. We get through the month with our two visits to the food bank. I’ve got to be creative in how to put these things together.”

Marilyn had a harder time. “When we got a raise in Social Security, they cut our food stamps. When they take away, they take away twice as much. I don’t know how I’d survive without the food bank.”

Thinking about the past year, Savannah, a mother of four children under age 10, said, “My kids ate and I didn’t. I only ate what they didn’t eat.” She was relieved they were able to eat meals at school.

One boy attending the group with his parents said, “Sometimes my belly is growling. I’m just like uhhh… I’m hungry.” He said he liked school meals, and named some of his favorites—spicy burritos, chili dogs, chicken, chocolate milk.

Work is hard to come by in their tourist area. Pete said, “I work in an industry where there’s not a lot of need—commercial/industrial work. What I did was fairly specialized.” He tried to start his own business doing hazardous tree removal. “So far I’ve paid myself $1,700 over the past three years. I’m able to pay some bills but never made enough money to pay myself beyond that.”

Pete would like to see the state make it less expensive to start and keep a small business. “The cost is killing us all whether it’s the business owner or the person looking for job,” he said.

Yvonne, a senior citizen who doesn’t get food stamps and relies on visiting the food bank twice a month, was grateful for her $40 Farmer’s Market Nutrition Program voucher. “I worry myself sick about Medicare or Social Security getting cut. I live day to day, penny to penny.”
Janette was quite candid about her situation. “My money didn’t cover rent. I had a cheap mobile home, $300 a month, but it was a dump. I could only afford heat for the kitchen, bedroom, and bathroom, and still had $200-$300 utility bill for the month. The landlady was old, couldn’t put work into it. I had to run four heaters underneath to keep the pipes from leaking. It was a deathtrap if it caught on fire. I gave notice. I moved out. I live in my van. I’ve got friends, an extension cord, a pee bucket for middle of the night stuff. I make it.”

During summers she sells produce out of her van to have some income.

Regarding medical needs, she said, “How do you know you’ve got health problems if you can’t afford to go to the doctor and find out what’s wrong? I’ve lost family members to cancer because they can’t afford to get checked out. I have one kidney that works, the other will fester.”

When Janette gets a kidney infection, she goes to see a veterinarian. “For $5 I get a coffee cup of the medicine that if I go to the store I would pay $350 for.”

Janette hopes that lower income people don’t have to go down any further. “I have a friend, we’ve been low income all our lives. He’s said when the bottom falls out, it won’t hurt us—we’re already there, we know how to survive. There are people that could not survive the way we do. They wouldn’t know how. We are extremely creative in the ways we’ve found by sharing or figuring out on our own.”
Dental care was another neglected need that some in the White Center group mentioned. “We need dental,” Samantha said. “You need teeth to eat.”

Each year, focus group participants leave us with two conflicting realities: We hear quiet desperation as people talk about the choices they make when faced with food insecurity, whether that is skipping meals so their children can eat, or gleaning produce from food intended for farm animals. We also hear amazing resilience as they talk about survival tips, building community to shop and cook together or sharing produce from their gardens.

This year we also heard more concern for health, not only personal health but the health of everyone in their communities. Jeana from Deer Park said it most clearly: “Everyone will benefit the healthier our society is. I mean emotionally, educationally, physically... I really believe the more you take care of the people who live with you in your community, the more the whole system will prosper.”

Our focus group participants lead us to ask: What kind of a country or community do we want to live in? What does it mean to take care of each other?

Public policies that improve the economic well-being of individuals as well as communities are essential. While Northwest Harvest continues to distribute food statewide to relieve the immediate desperation of hunger, we will also advocate for policies to make more sources of food available and address the causes of poverty.

Our vision is that ample, nutritious food is available to all.

We believe it is critical to:

**Protect SNAP Benefits**

SNAP is the first line of defense against hunger. We know our Hunger Response Network of more than 360 emergency food programs across Washington has been overstretched and cannot accommodate more SNAP cuts. SNAP also has a multiplier effect—every dollar of SNAP benefits generates $1.79 in local economic activity.14

At the federal level, we need to:

- Protect SNAP in negotiations of the budget, deficit reduction and Farm Bill.
- Restore cuts to SNAP, including the November 2013 expiration of economic stimulus benefits that for a family of four meant an average loss of $36 per month in food assistance.
- Support legislative vehicles that strengthen SNAP by expanding eligibility or increasing benefit amounts.

At the state level, we need to:

- Restore full funding for *State Food Assistance (SFA)*, a state-funded program for legal immigrants not eligible for SNAP, which was reduced to 75 percent of SNAP levels.

**Preserve Other Nutrition Programs**

In our state legislature, we are advocating for an increase in *Emergency Food Assistance Program (EFAP)* funding for the first time since the economic downturn. An increase of $1 million could leverage up to three million more meals. Food banks are under tremendous strain, serving more clients than they did before the recession. Existing clients are turning to food banks earlier and more often each month because their income is still too inadequate to meet household food needs. As you heard from the focus group participants, additional cuts to SNAP mean more strain—to households and to service providers.

**The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) and Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP) need to be strengthened and protected.** Emergency food programs trying to stem
the tide of SNAP cuts depend on these federally-funded programs that provide much needed supplemental food.

The Farmers Market Nutrition Programs for seniors and Women, Infants and Children (WIC) need support. They are in high demand but are critically underfunded, without enough vouchers to go to eligible clients. More funding means more vouchers and greater health and nutrition for the most vulnerable in our communities.

Child nutrition programs in schools, child care settings and during the summer build healthy children and a better-educated generation for the future. Focus group participants testified to the importance of school meals to their children; children attending our groups also said they were grateful for those meals. Improving participation in all these programs will benefit our youngest neighbors.

Economic Recovery Has Not Reached Hungry Families

Cuts to other basic services over the years have meant that households have to juggle the costs of other necessities and rely on nutrition assistance programs and food banks to put food on the table. Some who are able to find work may make too much to get SNAP, but too little to meet their basic needs.

Support Living Wage Jobs

To really move the needle on hunger, we need to see more jobs that pay good wages. Even though Washington has the highest state minimum wage in the nation, as you can see from the graphs in the data section for each county, having two full-time, minimum wage workers barely raises a household above poverty level, and falls short of income needed to be self-sufficient.

We are also concerned about those whose unemployment benefits have expired and have not yet found employment. We urge protection of unemployment benefits.

Support Budgets that Protect People

We support a balanced approach to our federal budget, one that makes sensible cuts that do not hurt vulnerable families, combined with reforms to our revenue system. We oppose budgets that take an all-cuts approach.

Recent reversal of sequestration cuts has been important to vulnerable families who need WIC and Head Start for preschoolers and Meals on Wheels for seniors. We will watch these programs in future negotiations.

As we heard from the focus group participants, health care is also something they must put aside or constantly worry about. The implementation of the provisions of the Affordable Care Act will be important to ensure more affordable health insurance and more comprehensive coverage for care.

Join Us!

We hear the echoes of Jeana’s urging to “help rebuild America” and we will continue to envision the kind of communities we want to live in. At Northwest Harvest, we will combine our advocacy on hunger and poverty issues with the hands-on, charitable work of distributing nutritious food to families in need. We support strong public policies and smart investments of public funds that strengthen Washington residents and help them meet their basic needs. We hope you will join us in our work to eliminate hunger, for the health of our communities.

To find out more about our advocacy work, contact Public Policy Manager Christina Wong: 206.923.7423; christinaw@northwestharvest.org.
**Process**

Focus groups were held in August and September 2013 at five locations across Washington, representing rural, urban, and suburban areas in Cowlitz, King, Kittitas, Mason, and Spokane counties. Food bank staff recruited clients and a total of 86 participated, representing a range of ages and life circumstances. Staff informed all participants that the group was not a requirement of receiving food. Northwest Harvest paid participants $30 for attending the two-hour focus group and offered 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**

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-age child). The guidelines used come from *The Self-Sufficiency Standard for Washington State*, developed by Dr. Diana Pearce of the University of Washington. 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**

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 2010, the U.S. Census Bureau released the **Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM)**\(^{16}\) 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 found 49.7 million poor people in 2012 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.

**Minimum Wage**\(^{11}\) Newly added to our data section for each county this year is a measure showing earnings for two adults working full-time at minimum wage. Since Washington has the highest state minimum wage in the nation at $9.32 per hour for 2014, some may think that level of pay would be adequate to sustain a household. The graph shows that even with two people working full-time at minimum wage of $9.19 in 2013, they fell short of meeting self-sufficiency standard in that county.

**200% of federal poverty**\(^{13}\) 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% of poverty level: 205% in Spokane County, and 266% in south King 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.

2 Northwest Harvest, Seattle, WA. Focus Group videos filmed after groups. http://www.northwestharvest.org/Focus-on-Food-Security-Stories


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 2013 figures representing available data closest to the focus group timeframe.


These data include those receiving Old-Age, Survivors, and Disability Insurance (OASDI) 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.


The federally-funded National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program provide nutritionally-balanced free or reduced-price meals to children in schools. In academic year 2012-13, 476,919 (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.


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 2012, 49% of all infants born in Washington received WIC benefits, and 308,546 women, infants and children participated in the program. WIC contributed $125,436,446 to local economies in Washington during 2012 from WIC checks used to purchase healthy foods at local grocery stores.


9a 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, 1,105,753 people participated in the program, 39% of them children.

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.

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).


United States Department of Labor, Wage and Hour Division. http://www.dol.gov/whd/minimumwage.htm. Washington has the highest state minimum wage in the nation at $9.32 per hour for 2014. We used 2013 rate of $9.19 per hour for this report since that was the minimum wage when the focus groups were held. Formula used for monthly earnings is $9.19 x 2080 hours x two people divided by 12 months. Please note that this graph represents full-time earnings for two adults working at minimum wage at 2013 rates, compared with 2013 federal poverty level for a family of four, but 2011 self-sufficiency level that has not been adjusted for inflation. Therefore, the minimum wage depiction is at the high end of what two able-bodied working adults might make if working full-time hours consistently for a whole year. For minimum wage workers, the reality is usually quite different.


The poverty guideline for a household of four in the 48 contiguous states was $23,550 per year in 2013.


The nation’s official poverty rate in 2012 was 15.0 percent, which represents 46.5 million people living at or below the poverty line. This marked the second consecutive year that neither the official poverty rate nor the number of people in poverty were statistically different from the previous year’s estimates. The 2012 poverty rate was 2.5 percentage points higher than in 2007, the year before the economic downturn.
