Focus on Food Security 2012: Keep Our Safety Net Intact!

NORTHWEST HARVEST’S Focus Group Report

northwestharvest.org
Hunger Stops Here.
ABOUT NORTHWEST HARVEST

Northwest Harvest is Washington’s own statewide hunger relief agency. Our mission is to provide nutritious food to hungry people statewide in a manner that respects their dignity, while fighting to eliminate hunger.

Last fiscal year we distributed 25.9 million pounds of food to a network of more than 330 food banks, meal programs and high-need schools across the state.

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Northwest Harvest’s Focus Group Report, January 2012

With Our Thanks

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I especially want to thank all participants who were willing to share stories of their lives, their struggles and their courage.

Each focus group summary is an opportunity to hear directly from the people who use the emergency food system to survive. It is a window into their lives and what they must cope with. They will be familiar to you—they are your neighbors, your friends, your relatives. Maybe you will even see yourself in their stories. At Northwest Harvest we are committed to working to make a better future possible for these people, our neighbors in need in Washington state.

Sincerely,
Shelley Rotondo, Executive Director

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Access previous years’ reports at:
northwestharvest.org/About_Us/Advocacy/Annual_Focus_Groups.htm
**INTRODUCTION**

“We don’t eat three meals a day. We eat dinner and my daughter eats lunch at school,” one mom said.

The number of Washington families experiencing food insecurity and hunger has nearly doubled since the start of the recession in 2008.¹

Headlines this year have been full of stark realities based on new data:

- As many as 400,000 children (25%) in Washington are estimated to live in food insecure households.¹
- Over one million Washingtonians rely on Basic Food/SNAP (food stamps) for sustenance. In September 2011, SNAP participation rose to a record 46.3 million Americans.³
- Half of all babies and children age five and under in our state depend on the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program for critical early nutrition, and working families make up 65% of WIC participants.⁴
- One in six U.S. households was found to be living in poverty in the 2010 census. The U.S. poverty rate was 15.1% in 2010, the highest since 1993.⁵

One grandmother summed up the importance of protecting social services: “I would like all the politicians who are taking things away to know they are taking it out of their mother’s mouth, their baby’s mouth. And that’s their mother who can’t go to the doctor. We’re all a family. If we can’t look after each other and make sure everybody gets what they need, where is this going?”
These are more than statistics; they reflect the daily struggles of people living in our communities, our neighbors, family, and friends.

During the 2011 Focus Group Project, we spoke with 70 food bank clients impacted by the realities of hunger in Grays Harbor, Okanogan, Skagit, Thurston and Yakima counties.

Many of them receive Basic Food/SNAP benefits, some grow their own food, but all of them depend on food banks to supplement their efforts to put food on their tables.

They make painful decisions every day: whether to eat or heat their homes, buy groceries or pay their medical bills.

“Our seniors shouldn’t be forced to make a choice between food and medicine,” one Hoquiam man said.

Local, state and federal governments are making hard budget decisions as well: Will we shred the safety net for our most vulnerable neighbors? Will budget cuts further erode people’s ability to provide for themselves or their families? Or will we find new sources of revenue and the political will to make sure children and families have the most basic means of survival?

This year, we heard among focus group participants resounding support for one woman’s plea: “Don’t cut what little we have left.” After enduring four years of economic downturn and cuts to human service budgets,
participants told us any more cuts would be like cutting to the bone. At the same time, the hunger response network is being asked to do more to make up for government cuts.

At Northwest Harvest we know this is not possible: Emergency food programs are being asked to do more with less. With continuing cuts to human services, food banks and meal programs may soon reach a breaking point. They will only be able to do less, with less, just when people need help the most.

Echoing participants, we want to highlight the importance of SNAP benefits (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, called Basic Food in Washington, and commonly called food stamps by participants) to this safety net. According to the USDA, SNAP benefits lifted 3.9 million individuals above the federal poverty line nationally in 2010. Even so, USDA found that 32% of eligible households in our state did not participate in the Basic Food program. We also know from USDA economic research that SNAP provides fiscal stimulus: Every $5 in SNAP benefits generates $9 of economic activity.

We invite you to listen to these peoples’ stories. Put yourself in their shoes and consider what it might be like to live in their town. Look at the data showing the external obstacles they face. And then help us eliminate hunger by taking action. When we increase economic well-being for them, we also increase the common good for ourselves and our communities.

“Quit cutting food stamps. Sometimes kids don’t understand that we don’t have money to buy food. My little sister cries when we can’t eat.”
Hoquiam participants told stories of struggling for decades to feed their families and support themselves in Grays Harbor. One life-long resident said: “It’s a skeleton. There is nothing--there is nothing here.”

“We’re a lumber town. One of the difficulties of this area is it does not have a diversified economy,” a woman said. “Logging was so central and since it tanked it just had a ripple effect. When that happens, it hurts the whole community.”

“That’s what everyone did here. Lumber and fishing,” said a man who had been a diesel electric engineer and a fish and game maintenance worker for years, until he got cancer.

Their most recent loss was the closing of the paper mill in Hoquiam, where over 200 people lost jobs.

“It seems like we have money to build a road but we don’t have money for food,” a woman said.

“They keep telling us the economy’s going down, but I see the prices keep climbing,” an older man said.

**False Promise of Jobs**

“They bring in all these companies and they promise all these jobs and then there are none,” another man said. Participants said a recent ethanol project provided some jobs, and they remained hopeful about a recycled wood mill at Satsop and a paper mill opening in Cosmopolis.

But they were especially disappointed in the pontoon building project for the new Highway 520 bridge. “It’s a big project and people were excited about it. But hundreds of previously picked employees from out of town got the jobs,” one jobseeker said.

“The labor union said there are 100 people in line,” said a father of four who had worked in the shake mills for 20 years. “It’s like, do I have $20 to pay union dues, or do I use that $20 to feed my kids? It’s a job in itself to look for a job.”

One man reported working for minimum wage: “The Westport shipyard let me go two days short of my 90 days, when I would be eligible to be hired on and get benefits, and that day I saw 10 new temporaries come in.”

“I have been in this perpetual cycle for four years,” he continued. “It is tearing my family apart. Yesterday was my son’s birthday and we had to say sorry, we can’t buy a cake.”

Over half the group had been homeless: “I lived in my car for almost three years

“Our seniors shouldn’t be forced to make a choice between food and medicine.”
until my car got towed away. I couldn’t afford to get it out so I had to let it go.”

**Putting Food on the Table**

Participants shared recipes and strategies for making food last longer, taste better, and adapting food bank items for special diets. There were many creative chefs in the room, but one man summed it up: “If you’re hungry enough you’ll eat anything.”

“We don’t eat three meals a day. We eat dinner and my daughter eats lunch at school,” one mom said.

“I have worried when the kids are home from school,” said a grandmother. “My grandkids come over, and you worry about running out. They always cut my food stamps in summer.”

**Basic Food/SNAP Fills the Gap**

Most were able to receive varying levels of food stamp benefits through the Basic Food program. “I just got $17 more and that $17 goes a long way,” said one woman. “It puts food on our table.”

“You actually get to go shopping. It is nice to be able to go into the grocery store and shop for food regular people eat,” a woman said. “Even though you are in between a rock and a hard place, you can still feel normal.”

Another woman had a bad experience with a clerk at a grocery store while using her food stamp card: “I have a college degree and my husband is a lawyer but he can’t find work. There is no work in this county; the unemployment is 14%. Just because you are on food stamps does not mean you are a deadbeat, does not mean you are stupid and does not mean you are scamming.”

“Don’t cut our food stamps because I rely on them,” one mom said quietly. “Everybody I know who’s on food stamps gives back.”

**Decrease the Gap Between Rich and Poor**

One man who’d seen million dollar yachts being built in the shipyards said: “There’s too much of a gap between us. There’s the rich and poor, the have and the have nots.”

To government officials, a man said: “They need to increase the poverty level—it needs to be brought up. Don’t tell us the cost of living hasn’t gone up!”

“Share the wealth—we gotta take care of ourselves before other countries. It’s a global place, but help is needed at home first,” a participant said emphatically.

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**Grays Harbor County:**

Residents with incomes at or below 200% Federal Poverty Level (2010)

- **38% (26,299)**

Unemployment rate (Aug. 2011)

- **12.9%**

Schoolchildren eligible for free and reduced-price meals (Oct. 2011, Hoquiam School District)

- **62% (1,114)**

Percent of population on Social Security (2010)

- **35.9%**

**Total persons served, June 2011:**

- Basic Food (food stamps)

- **16,757**

- Medical assistance

- **15,101**

- TANF cash assistance

- **2,278**

- Disability Lifeline

- **559**

WIC total clients (2010)

- **4,810**

Self-Sufficiency Standard: The graph shows the inadequacy of poverty level income in meeting a household’s survival needs. The self-sufficiency standard is the income needed to provide basic needs for a family of four in this county.

**Monthly income needed for self-sufficiency:** **$3,747**

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“The thing that has affected me most is not having dental care. I used to smile a lot but now I don’t because of my teeth.”
“In my house, me and my husband eat less so our kids can eat. We have three boys and a daughter, and they are always hungry and eating,” said a mom.

“We had a scare—they cut all our cash benefits, and we didn’t know how we would survive. Our kids would eat first, and my husband and I last.”

“It’s chicken on Sunday, feathers the rest of the week,” a man quipped.

“Every once in a while I think ‘I can starve,’” a young man said more seriously.

“I like the staple foods, they last longer than most,” said a man. “I eat oatmeal every day and I appreciate that.” Some liked frozen foods they received at food banks, others said canned food worked better because their electricity was shut off or they didn’t have a freezer.

The choice of grocery stores is limited, and public transportation to them is slow and scarce. There are food banks in outlying rural areas, but as one parent said, “You’ve got to have gas to get to any of these places. Back and forth is 10 miles.”

Only three participants received food stamps. Most of the others said they made a few dollars too much to qualify, or were cut off without understanding the reason. “What you get in food stamps does help. We have $110 for a family of six. They say that we make too much,” the mother said, even though their only household income was Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits.

“Someone has to die for you to get a job.”

“Half of the participants have diabetes. They spoke of the financial burden and complications, and difficulty accessing healthy foods.”

The group in Okanogan ranged in age from 10 to 80 and most had lived in the area for several decades. They didn’t want to leave their home, but acknowledged, “This is a depressed area and has been depressed for years.”

“I’ve lived here since the 1970s and lately I’ve needed help. I used to be self-sufficient, but now it’s gotten to the point where I can’t maintain myself,” said one long-time, senior resident. “I work a few hours at Wal-Mart, and I only get $900 a month from Social Security.”

Access to Food is Limited

All participants had worried about running out of food sometime in the past year, and most in the last month.
One young man illustrated the challenges: “I was working at the athletic club and they let me go because I wasn’t a ‘proper fit.’ I worked at an escrow service and they let me go because people stopped buying houses. I worked at a meat business but they laid me off because they stopped cutting meat. I’ve applied at Arby’s, Home Depot, McDonalds.”

His friend spoke of a minimum-wage job he had bagging fruit for schools, “hunkered down at the end of a conveyer belt. Then I got laid off because my job was no longer necessary.”

A woman had been a nurse’s aide in Tonasket, but was hurt on the job and let go. She now provides home health care for four companies. “I had to pay $600 a month for COBRA benefits when I wasn’t working. My diabetic supplies cost almost $1,000 a month. I have enough hours, but the companies won’t combine my hours into full time.”

**Ignoring Medical Concerns**

One man could not afford hundreds of dollars for his arthritis medication. “So I don’t take it. There is no way in the world you can afford medicine like that.”

One woman felt really lucky to have insurance through work. But her husband had to be airlifted after having a stroke, and now they owe $182,000.

Half of the participants have diabetes. They spoke of the financial burden and complications, and difficulty accessing healthy foods. “We struggle with his medical bills because he is diabetic and his bills are so high,” another woman said.

“All of my kids need glasses and the insurance told me they don’t cover it no more,” a mom said. “I needed this tooth pulled, and it was $122 for the exam and $266 to have it pulled.”

**Protect What Little We Have Left**

Regarding Social Security, a woman said: “We haven’t had a cost of living raise since the stimulus check. Insurance costs go up and my actual money I get goes down.”

“Don’t cut what little we have left, whether it is Social Security, Disability, or what little medical we can scrounge.” Many agreed that protecting Social Security, Medicare and DSHS programs was the priority.

**Okanogan County:**

Residents with incomes at or below 200% Federal Poverty Level (2010)$^{9}$: **42% (16,956)**

Unemployment rate (Aug. 2011)$^{10}$: **8.2%**

Schoolchildren eligible for free and reduced-price meals (Oct. 2011, Okanogan School District)$^{11}$: **58% (603)**

Percent of population on Social Security (2010)$^{12}$: **38%**

Total persons served, June 2011:
- Basic Food (food stamps)$^{13}$: **9,839**
- Medical assistance$^{14}$: **11,537**
- TANF cash assistance$^{15}$: **860**
- Disability Lifeline$^{16}$: **244**

WIC total clients (2010)$^{17}$: **4,379**

Self-Sufficiency Standard$^{18}$: The graph shows the inadequacy of poverty level income in meeting a household’s survival needs. The self-sufficiency standard is the income needed to provide basic needs for a family of four in this county.

**Monthly Income Needed for Self-Sufficiency:** **$3,413**

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Mount Vernon was the site of a trilingual focus group. Interpreters helped participants from Mexico, Peru, Russia, Ukraine, and longtime Skagit Valley residents join in conversation. Rather than dwelling on their differences, participants shared commonalities of struggling to feed themselves and their children during hard times.

**Food Banks Help Fill the Gaps**

One woman said that food banks are good for those like her who work in the fields, especially for staples like flour, beans, rice and vegetables: “Food banks help us a lot because food stamps are not enough to last the month, and Wal-Mart is expensive.”

“The price in the stores goes up, but the money doesn’t. My husband worked for several years and then they cut his salary because it was hard times. But food prices keep going up and up,” a woman said.

A mother admitted: “Our refrigerator is empty and sometimes we don’t have food. The money doesn’t reach far enough. We never suffered this much. I’ve always had food and a good job.”

“Toward the end of the month, we got to the point where there’s a box of pancake mix and we mix it with water because there’s no milk or egg. Then you go to the food bank, but it’s a long time to wait when all you have is pancake mix in your cupboard,” she said.

**Decreased Benefits Take Toll**

Some had seen their food stamp benefits diminish over the past year. When one military veteran received disability benefits, his food stamps decreased. Another senior citizen said: “I was on food stamps until my Social Security kicked in, and then food stamps stopped.”

With such a high cost of living in Skagit County, another participant was concerned that Social Security provided no cost-of-living increase while food and gasoline prices soared. “We count on that to put gas in our tank and get to the doctor’s office or the food bank.”

Undocumented immigrants had difficulties applying for jobs or accessing services, such as health care. “You might be sick but you live with the pain because you’d rather spend the money for food,” one said and others nodded.

**Where Did the Jobs Go?**

“The last couple years have been really bad,” one man said, because jobs and industries moved out of the area. “When there is work, too many people apply, it doesn’t matter what kind.”

“In Mount Vernon we had a frozen food plant; it has closed. We used to work in the fields; there’s machines picking now. This year jobs were very few,” another man said, adding that the late harvest caused by weather didn’t help.

A man who had been a fast food manager put in multiple applications at other fast food businesses to no avail: “I had my food handler’s card and everything I needed, but I still couldn’t get a job. So now I have to go out of town, to Bellingham, but gas is too expensive.”

“You might be sick but you live with the pain because you’d rather spend the money for food.”
Housing and Other Bills First

“As long as your rent’s paid, everything else comes second, like my parents used to say,” said one man. Participants knew about and depended on community resources to pay utility bills.

The waiting list for low-income housing is long. One participant waited five years. Another mother with a large family had a hard time finding housing, but a Skagit-Whatcom program helped her family build their own home.

A migrant farmworker mother said they live in housing in the fields during June through October, and then they’ll need to find somewhere else to go, possibly Georgia.

“When we came here, we didn’t know anybody, we had nothing here and we lived in our car. We had to stay for two weeks in the car,” said a mom of a family of four.

While no one would ever use payday loans again, one man said: “I use pawn shops—they’re my storage.”

Help the Poor People

One 13-year-old girl who was interpreting for her mother said: “Quit cutting food stamps. Sometimes kids don’t understand that we don’t have money to buy food. My little sister cries when we can’t eat.”

“Stop supporting the big corporations and spend more helping the little guys,” a long-time Skagit resident said. “Help the poor people.”

“Moms need to be healthy to raise children,” one said. Several echoed that they need medical benefits more than anything. For those that had medical, they sorely needed vision and dental coverage to be included. They would prefer to have employment and insurance so they could pay for their own kids.

“If one day you are going to talk with the politicians, tell them children have the right to care and food and Medicaid,” a mom urged. “The children really need that health insurance. They’re taking away programs for the elderly and children.”

Skagit County:

Residents with incomes at or below 200% Federal Poverty Level (2010): **30% (35,222)**

Unemployment rate (Aug. 2011): **9.4%**


Percent of population on Social Security (2010): **33.4%**

Total persons served, June 2011:
- Basic Food (food stamps): **22,762**
- Medical assistance: **22,906**
- TANF cash assistance: **2,669**
- Disability Lifeline: **575**
- WIC total clients (2010): **6,928**

Self-Sufficiency Standard: The graph shows the inadequacy of poverty level income in meeting a household’s survival needs. The self-sufficiency standard is the income needed to provide basic needs for a family of four in this county.

*Monthly income needed for self-sufficiency: $4,273*
The group was well-attended by a mix of long-time residents and newcomers. Everyone had worried about running out of food in the past year. Living in our state capital, they also knew there were political solutions to the hardships they were experiencing.

“Everybody should have a place to live and food to eat,” one woman declared.

A young woman had endured hard economic times through “extreme budgeting. I set a dollar limit per day. We aim to eat healthy and organic, but we come to the food bank and we dumpster dive, so you have to take what you can get.”

“I used to come twice a month to the food bank,” a woman said. “But since I live out in the county, no buses go out there. You can’t even take a bus to find a job; you have to walk three miles to get to the bus.”

“Because I am disabled, I come to the food bank earlier in the month and save my food stamps for later. I come earlier and there are less people in the line and more food available,” said a woman using a walker, who depends on public transportation.

Some participants had seen donations to the food bank go down and knew that the federal Emergency Food and Shelter Program (EFSP) cuts to Thurston County would have a direct impact on the food bank.

**Summer is Tough for Hungry Kids**

“It’s summer and we live out in Scott Lake, and to get to the places where there is free lunch for kids, it’s just too much to get there,” a parent said. “August is especially tough.”

“This is the third year of the food bank coming to our apartment complex and they are serving 300 kids a month. It’s been a huge help,” said a woman. “A lot of kids in our complex are hungry and that lunch is the only food they get. That it ends a week and a half before school starts is really tough.”

“I’d rather go hungry before my kids go hungry,” a mom admitted. “Only about a week ago we didn’t have enough food, so I went to bed without food. They asked me why, and I said they needed to eat, I could go without.”

**Making Food Stamps Stretch**

Most participants received Basic Food benefits because of good outreach by food bank staff: “They make you feel like you are in a temporary situation and you aren’t alone. The food card...”

“I don’t think people who worked their whole lives for retirement should have to worry about it being cut.”
has been a godsend. It has been great during the summer as a temporary measure until our income increases.”

“The price of food is going up, but our food stamps have stayed the same. I think this is why we are having such an issue. It’s hard when you don’t know a lot of resources,” said a woman.

Another uses hers as a supplement “for things like dairy and meat that you don’t get much of at the food bank.”

“In food stamps there are different levels of earned income and non-earned,” said an informed participant. “When I applied and put in our figures, it said I was eligible for $500 a month. But we only get $97 a month because of unearned income. My husband was in the military for 22 years to get that ‘unearned income.’”

“I just want to point out the positive side,” said a student. “I have never been on food assistance and never been to a food bank until I moved here. I am so glad we have this system. I know it isn’t always fair.”

**Seeking Policy-based Solutions**

One man felt that public policy should have a role in creating solutions: “I don’t like the games being played in terms of ‘do we raise taxes or cut programs.’ We need to establish a new baseline, eliminate all tax loopholes.”

“I am on Disability Lifeline and it was cut to $197 and will be gone in November,” said a woman. “My husband is on SSI, and we are starting to look for a new place to live, and in this county it’s tough. In the last 10 years I have been homeless six of them. I am trying to get my life back together. I just don’t see a future; I am not seeing the bright light at the end of the tunnel.”

One woman invited policymakers to live her life for six months, not knowing if they would have a job at the end: “Pay my bills and do the running around. I worked until I got sick. I didn’t ask for a blood disease—it happened.”

Participants were adamant about protecting Social Security and Medicare: “I don’t think people who worked their whole lives for retirement should have to worry about it being cut.”

“We need to take care of each other. Why do some need to be up here and some down here,” said the woman who dumpster dives, illustrating with her hands the gap between the haves and the have-nots.

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**Thurston County:**

Residents with incomes at or below 200% Federal Poverty Level (2010): **24% (59,288)**

Unemployment rate (Aug. 2011): **8.1%**

Schoolchildren eligible for free and reduced-price meals (Oct. 2011, Olympia School District): **26% (2,481)**

Percent of population on Social Security (2010): **27.1%**

Total persons served, June 2011:

- Basic Food (food stamps): **36,864**
- Medical assistance: **32,350**
- TANF cash assistance: **4,741**
- Disability Lifeline: **1,305**
- WIC total clients (2010): **8,761**

Self-Sufficiency Standard: The graph shows the inadequacy of poverty level income in meeting a household’s survival needs. The self-sufficiency standard is the income needed to provide basic needs for a family of four in this county.

**Monthly income needed for self-sufficiency: $4,481**

100% Federal Poverty Level: **$1,863**
In the midst of a hot, summer day, focus group participants held great anticipation for the harvest season that was arriving late this year. They spoke about enjoying the bounty of produce available in the Yakima Valley, and felt a connection to the nutritious food that grew all around them and a desire to access it.

Even in midsummer, participants were already worried about how they would eat after the harvest was over and jobs would be scarce. They were concerned about running out of food: “The lack of work in the winter is the reason why the winter is so hard,” one participant said.

“Beans and rice is the staple, and if there is something left over, you put it in for flavor. We used to put deer meat with the beans when we were younger. Now only rich people go hunting,” a woman said.

Those who receive food stamps use them to supplement what they receive from the food bank: “We don’t get much, but we appreciate what we get,” one man said. Participants shared tips for making food stamps stretch by buying meat in bulk at sale prices and cutting it into smaller meal portions. They shared where to get the most affordable dairy products.

Because food stamps cannot be used to buy cooked foods at grocery stores, one man said about the restrictions: “Sometimes I would just like to get a hot chicken,” instead of having to purchase day-old chicken in the refrigerated section.

**Jobs at a Standstill**

“I have been unemployed a little over a year. I lost my job in April 2010, and now I am going back to school for retraining in radiology. I was in landscaping management. When the economy went sour, everything kind of slowed down,” said a father of five.

“We knew we just needed to cut back everything and make things work. We are fortunate to have enough, and the food banks help. WIC is excellent, but the dollars aren’t going as far,” he said. While he and his wife do not have medical insurance, the five children depended on coverage through the state Apple Health program that could face budget cuts.

“Construction is kind of at a standstill,” another said. “My son—

“I have Medicare, but the medication I’m on, they didn’t pay hardly any of it. So I stopped taking it. What can I do? If I can’t afford it, I can’t afford it.”
in-law is an electrician, and he has not been able to find a job for a year. We try to help each other out, going to the food banks, and we share.”

A grandmother concurred: “I am retired, but for my kids, they have a hard time finding a job or getting steady work. They may be working one or two days a week and it isn’t enough.”

**Other Bills Add to the Problem**

“Electricity is going up. There is no way I can be without electricity at my house because I have a pump for my well. If I don’t have electricity, I can’t eat, drink, shower,” said one woman. Most participants had access to a payment plan, but also found that utility bill assistance was less available.

Several people with disabilities and seniors depended on Social Security: “I have Medicare, but the medication I’m on, they didn’t pay hardly any of it. So I stopped taking it. What can I do? If I can’t afford it, I can’t afford it,” said a woman.

Others were grateful that at least they could go to the Yakima Valley Farm Workers Clinic for emergency health care and other services.

**We’re All a Family**

One member of the group was very clear about how to help our state’s budget crisis: “They need to go after the billionaires and millionaires and make them pay their taxes.” A new immigrant with health problems bemoaned the five-year wait before she is eligible for benefits, saying through her translator: “When I qualify, I will be dead.”

Regarding budget cuts, a participant said: “They are always thinking about the money but they don’t think about the people.”

One grandmother summed up the importance of protecting social services: “I would like all the politicians who are taking things away to know they are taking it out of their mother’s mouth, their baby’s mouth. And that’s their mother who can’t go to the doctor. We’re all a family. If we can’t look after each other and make sure everybody gets what they need, where is this going?”

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**Yakima County:**

Residents with incomes at or below 200% Federal Poverty Level (2010)^9: **49% (116,471)**

Unemployment rate (Aug. 2011)^10: **9.8%**

School children eligible for free and reduced-price meals (Oct. 2011, Yakima School District) ^11: **82% (12,326)**

Percent of population on Social Security (2010)^12: **26.8%**

*Total persons served, June 2011:*

- Basic Food (food stamps)^13: **70,101**
- Medical assistance^14: **75,344**
- TANF cash assistance^15: **10,869**
- Disability Lifeline^16: **1,330**
- WIC total clients (2010)^17: **29,276**

Self-Sufficiency Standard^18: The graph shows the inadequacy of poverty level income in meeting a household’s survival needs. The self-sufficiency standard is the income needed to provide basic needs for a family of four in this county.

**Monthly income needed for self-sufficiency:** **$3,746**
The Urgency of Our Work: Please Join Us

The stories, struggles and voices of focus group participants highlight the urgency of our Northwest Harvest mission to eliminate hunger and align with our three public policy positions:

Promote Access to Nutritious Foods:

Northwest Harvest will strive to take a lead in advocating, educating and organizing to promote access to nutritious food for low-income people. Beyond our traditional role in the hunger relief system, this will include advocacy on behalf of government programs including but not limited to: Basic Food/SNAP, state EFAP, federal TEFAP, school nutrition services, summer meals, WIC, and Farmers’ Market Nutrition Programs. In addition to helping emergency food providers distribute nutritious food, we want to help families provide their own meals, generate economic activity, and create jobs for grocers, local farmers, and small business owners.

Help Low-income People Meet their Basic Needs:

Northwest Harvest will support advocacy efforts to protect and strengthen programs and activities that help low-income people meet their basic needs. We know from focus group participants that state programs like Basic Health insurance coverage, TANF/Work First and Working Connections Childcare ease the burden on household budgets, providing more for food and reducing chronic hunger. Federal utility assistance programs such as LIHEAP relieve household burdens over whether to heat their homes or eat.

Support Budgets that Preserve a Basic Safety Net:

Northwest Harvest will specifically advocate against an all-cuts approach to local, state and federal budgeting that results in cuts to eligibility or services for programs supporting low-income people or our Partner Programs. We will support revenue options while making sensible cuts that hold safety net programs harmless. We urge governments to do what they can to create living wage jobs and invest in local communities.

“I’d rather go hungry before my kids go hungry,” a mom admitted. “Only about a week ago we didn’t have enough food, so I went to bed without food. They asked me why, and I said they needed to eat, I could go without.”

To find out more about our advocacy work, contact Public Policy Manager Christina Wong: 206-923-7465; christinaw@northwestharvest.org.
Processes, Poverty Measures and Definitions

Focus groups were held in July and August 2011 at five locations across the state, representing urban, suburban and rural areas: Hoquiam Food Bank, Okanogan Food Bank, Skagit Valley Neighbors in Need in Mount Vernon, Thurston County Food Bank in Olympia, and Yakima Food Bank.

Food bank staff recruited a total of 70 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. Two Northwest Harvest staff members conducted the groups. Participants are not named to protect their anonymity; all photos used were obtained with consent from participants.

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

Self-Sufficiency Standard

100% of the federal poverty guidelines 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.

200% of the federal poverty level This measure of income more closely indicates what is needed for self-sufficiency. In four of the five communities the monthly income needed exceeds 200%: 201% for Yakima and Grays Harbor, 229% for Skagit, and 241% for Thurston 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.

Unemployment Rate 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 2011 figures since they represent available data closest to the focus group timeframe.

National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program These federal programs provide nutritionally-balanced free or reduced-price meals to children in schools. In the academic year 2010-2011, 452,076 (44%) of schoolchildren in Washington were eligible to receive
free or reduced-price school lunches. In January 2011, the USDA proposed stricter nutritional standards for school meal programs. The intent of the standards is to make school meals healthier by increasing the servings of healthy fruits and vegetables; however, implementation of the standards has faced opposition because of increased costs. Focus group participants attested to the critical role these school meals play in their children’s lives.

**Social Security, SSDI, SSI** Social Security, Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) provide monthly benefits to retired workers (aged 65 or older), workers who have disabilities, their survivors and dependents, and children with disabilities. 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 these benefits. In January 2012, benefits will increase by 3.6% due to the first cost of living adjustment since 2009. Any eligibility or structural changes enacted by Congress, or delays in receiving benefits caused by government shutdowns, could have detrimental results for focus group participants whose monthly survival depends on this fixed income.

**Basic Food Program** 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 August 2011 in our state, 1,127,065 people participated in the program; from September 2010 to September 2011, there was an 8.1% increase in statewide participation.

**Medical Assistance** The Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) Medical Assistance data we cite here includes all coverage groups, including the numerous Medicaid programs available, both state and federally funded. The Basic Health Program, Washington’s public health insurance program for working poor adults, faces elimination in the 2012 supplemental budget process. This would terminate medical coverage for approximately 35,000 working adults who make too much money to qualify for Medicaid but too little money to purchase medical insurance on the private market. Governor Gregoire recommends that Basic Health be bought back should the legislature and the voting public approve of serious revenue reform measures.

**TANF** This data includes both federally-funded Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)/WorkFirst and state-funded State Family Assistance (SFA) programs, providing cash assistance to low-income families with children while they strive to become self-sufficient. The Governor’s 2012 Supplemental Budget Proposal recommends several cost saving measures that could drastically impact households dependent on TANF and/or SFA including: reducing monthly TANF benefits by 2% (so that a family of three will receive $468/month), reducing the lifetime limit for receiving TANF funds from 60 months to 48 months (affecting 2,000 households), and elimination of the SFA program.

**Disability Lifeline** The General Assistance (GA-U/GA-X) program was renamed Disability Lifeline by the state legislature in March 2010. It provided cash grants to low-income adults without children who are unable to work due to a physical or mental impairment that is expected to last at least 90 days. Disability Lifeline was eliminated from the 2011-2013 budget and ended in October 2011. Medical coverage was still offered to people with disabilities who cannot otherwise work through the Disability Lifeline Medical program; however, that program now faces elimination during the 2012 supplemental budget process.

**WIC** 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. Changes in the program in 2009 allowed families to use WIC checks to buy a wider variety of nutritious foods. 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. Working families were 65% of WIC participants, but 66% of families receiving WIC benefits were classified as having poverty-level incomes. WIC faces significant budget cuts in the federal deficit reduction negotiations process.
References
