Focus on Food Security 2011: How Can Our Communities Survive More Cuts?
Northwest Harvest's Focus Group Report
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We especially thank all the focus group participants who were willing to tell stories of their lives, their struggles and their courage. We commit ourselves to working with you to make a better future possible.

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Focus Group Reports for three previous years available at: www.northwestharvest.org/About_Us/News/Advocacy.htm.

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 year we supplied 24 million pounds of food to a network of more than 330 food banks, meal programs and elementary schools across the state.

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“Being self-employed I don't get a paycheck and I don't get government assistance. So I'm at my breaking point right now.”

“I was on unemployment but now it's just gone. Now I am on food stamps and the food banks.”

“The thing that gets me is you feel guilty. Why can't I live on this much money? Social Security says I should be able to do, so why can't I?”

Washington's lowest-income residents are resilient survivors who have endured three crushing years of economic recession. They have resourcefully navigated some of the most difficult times in the history of our state and nation. But at what costs to themselves and their families? And how long will their limited resources hold out? Most have depleted any emergency funds they had, and those who were poor before the recession are beyond the breaking point. Our network of over 330 food banks and meal programs across the state has been stretched to meet a 35% increase in need for their services during the past three years.

In these days of difficult budget decisions for our families and our governments alike, people living at or below 200% of Federal Poverty Level are in greatest need of support in their ongoing struggles for survival. We heard them ask: How can we survive more cuts?

The Hungry in Washington 2010 report released by the Children's Alliance and
based on USDA data\textsuperscript{1} shows alarming increases: One in seven households (367,000 households in Washington State) experienced food insecurity, or concern that there will not be enough food for everyone in the household, a 27\% increase from 2009. Hunger is a more extreme case of food insecurity, and the rate of hunger in Washington jumped 36\% over the previous year. As a result, Washington now ranks as 13\textsuperscript{th} hungriest and the 17\textsuperscript{th} most food insecure state in the nation.

In July and August 2010, Northwest Harvest conducted focus groups at five locations across the state, to hear how experiences of hunger and poverty are shaped by different regions and landscapes. We visited Newport and downtown Spokane in Eastern Washington. We traveled to Port Angeles on our northwest coast and Ocean Park on our southwest coast. Finally, we visited Maple Valley to hear from folks struggling with rural poverty in Western Washington.

Two Northwest Harvest staff members conducted the groups and talked with 64 low-income Washingtonians who come to our partner food banks and meal programs as a means of survival. Participants from a range of ages and life circumstances were recruited by food program staff while using their services.

As we have seen since the start of the recession, there were people newly unemployed and new to food bank

“I grew up poor so stocking food has always been important, you keep a little bit extra. You pack what you can. I try to eat as fresh as I can. Then I had to start coming to the food bank. I had never been to one before but this one, but I am thankful for the food bank.”
lines. But most striking was how long most participants have experienced uncertainty about where their next meal was coming from, and the toll that this worry and hunger has taken on their health and lives.

While the faces were different at each location, the stories all told similar tales of struggle and survival. Common to all groups was a simple narrative: hunger is not only a problem of having enough food on the table, hunger is a problem of having enough money to make ends meet.

The participants we heard from were thankful we took the time to listen to their stories and experiences, and they challenged us to consider walking in their shoes to see how harsh the reality of poverty is no matter where you live. We invite you to do the same as you read their stories.

We believe their experiences urgently underscore the importance of a sound public-private safety net, at a time when severe cuts to state and local budgets threaten its very existence.

Northwest Harvest and our partners will continue to advocate for those we heard from in these focus groups. We will lift up their stories as we urge our policymakers to make the needed investments in the public structures critical to helping them meet their basic needs.

“If it wasn’t for the food bank, our cupboards and refrigerator would be bare. It wasn’t that we were begging. It’s just that we had $8 an hour jobs and all our money went to bills.”
Newport Population²: 2,045
Pend Oreille County Population²: 13,100

Living on the Border with Idaho

Isolated against a beautiful mountain backdrop near the Idaho border, the participants in our Newport focus group spoke of their remote community’s lack of access to food and basic services. While they loved the community where they live, they realized there were tradeoffs that were affecting their health and well-being. And with unemployment at 10.7% and mill jobs long gone, there are few options on the horizon.

Newport is especially isolated in the winter, with a 50-mile drive to Spokane for best prices on food and other services. They said the main store in town is a lot more expensive: “I get angry when you can’t go to the store and afford bread.”

Though they are a 10-minute drive from Idaho where there are lower taxes, there are fewer food stores in those tourist towns. Public transportation options are few; the one shuttle that travels through Newport from Priest River, ID, to Spokane has a limited schedule.

Living on the Border of Subsistence

Though Newport is a mountain town, our participants experienced it as a food desert. It was clear they had knowledge about the importance of eating more nutritious foods, but they experienced frustration not being able to access them affordably without driving long distances. “It’s easier and cheaper for us to buy prepackaged foods, but that stuff is terrible for us. It’s healthier to

“It’s easier and cheaper for us to buy prepackaged foods, but that stuff is terrible for us. It’s healthier to”
get fruits and vegetables but it’s way more expensive,” one woman said.

Another tried to grow food for her household, but the rain and late frost damaged everything. “It’s hard to grow gardens in this town.”

One senior citizen on a fixed income said, “We have not had a raise in three years.” Having a Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program coupon for $40 in produce during the summer meant a lot to her. Having about $40 in food stamps allows her to get what she needs to eat for her diabetic diet: “It’s kind of like an emergency fund. It’s not a whole lot, but hey— it’s better than nothing.” She volunteers when she can and shares items with others in her senior housing. “I hate to see someone going hungry, that just tears me up,” she said.

Those that had raised children were well aware of the value of school nutrition programs: “Sometimes that’s the only meal kids will have.” Unlike some other rural areas, the summer meal site for their community was well marked from the main street, and they knew children could eat there during the summer. With budget cuts to school activities, they believed children had to fend for themselves more in Newport. “Children don’t have a choice, they don’t get to choose, they don’t have a job, they don’t have the money. That really makes me sad, to hear of a child going without food.”

One woman caring for a household of three adults and one teenage grandson subsists by fixing food that lasts several meals, like soups and stews. She adds extra flour or pasta to items the food bank gives her, like biscuit mix, Hamburger Helper, and macaroni and cheese, to make them last longer.

Living on the Border of Illness

One participant was going to her doctor that week to find out if she was diabetic. Working as a homecare provider, her health insurance coverage was about to change, resulting in a higher premium and travel to Spokane to access medical care. She wasn’t sure how she was going to manage that in winter. “I am really worried and panicking about that. I will wait until I’m desperate.”

But even in the midst of these challenges, one participant shared her optimism: “My glass is half-full; I’m a positive person.” She gives back by volunteering when she can. She remembers comforting a man who was crying in frustration and shame for having to go to a food bank. “It’s hard to ask for food whether you’re a man or woman.”

### SELF-SUFFICIENCY STANDARD

Monthly income needed for self-sufficiency for a family of four in Pend Oreille County: $3,356.

- **Pend Oreille County:**
  - Number of low-income residents with incomes at or below 200% Federal Poverty Level (2000): **4,918 (43%)**
  - Unemployment rate (9/10): **10.7%**

**Total persons served DSHS (June 2010):**
- Basic Food (food stamps, 2010): **2,935**
- Medical assistance (2010): **2,510**
- TANF cash assistance (2010): **465**
- Disability Lifeline (2010): **175**
- WIC (2009 annual total unduplicated clients): **516**
- Schoolchildren receiving free and reduced-price meals (10/09, Newport School District): **699 (59%)**

### Taxes: -$2
- Miscellaneous: $305
- Health Care: $398
- Transportation: $359
- Food: $706
- Child Care: $829
- Housing: $760

Monthly income needed for self-sufficiency for a family of four in Pend Oreille County: $3,356.

The Federal Poverty Level (FPL*) for a family of four for 2010 was $1,838 per month.
Navigating Urban Life

One Spokane man's tangible experiences of hunger and homelessness help frame the story we heard there: “It's a story of the haves and the have nots.”

Our lively conversation in downtown Spokane included well-seasoned knowledge of what it takes to survive the realities of extreme urban poverty. Participants who were currently or formerly homeless were well-aware of the benefits and resources available to them in Spokane as well as the limitations of those resources. They pointed out the best and worst practices among services they had used.

It was clear that survival in Spokane meant piecing together many different resources. Participants had survived in large part due to two programs for people with disabilities—General Assistance Unemployable (GAU, a state program) and Supplemental Security Income (SSI, a federal program)—as well as Veteran’s benefits, food stamps, food banks, meal programs, and other community assistance. And they had also survived on their own resourcefulness. One man used the Spokane River as his refrigerator while he was living under a bridge. Another accessed numerous services, but even together they never got him through the month. “I've had to learn to stretch everything out,” he said.

Most used both food banks and meal programs: “If it wasn't for a food bank, our cupboards and refrigerator would be bare. It wasn't that we were begging. It's just that we had $8 an hour jobs and all our money went to bills.”

**Basic Food Program Essential**

Two-thirds of participants in Spokane were enrolled in the Basic Food (food stamp) program and absolutely depended on it. “I get $16, but I used to get $30. I appreciate that $16 when everything else is gone.”

One man pointed out the importance of transportation in accessing food: “When you walk and stuff, it’s really hard being homeless, to get to the stores that are having the sales. I don't advise anyone to shop the small stores because it sucks up your food stamps. They charge almost twice as much as other stores.” Another said, “In the past when I did have a place to live I could plan my meals, but when you are constantly on the go, you can't.”

“Food stamps don't stretch. Right now I am running out because it's the end of the month. I want to take our politicians here and have them live on food stamps for a month. I encourage everybody to be a registered voter and write their representatives,” one man advocated.

**Housing Limitations**

One-third of the group was homeless when we spoke with them and some had given up on finding a place. “I know all about the hoops you gotta jump through to get housing,” said one man who had waited two years but finally got housing. “Discrimination is out there, whether you like it or not.”

The winters are difficult and often below freezing for those living on the
streets; they said severe weather shelters don’t open up until temperatures drop below 15 degrees. But luckily there were more emergency food resources and church meals in winter due to the holidays: “We eat a lot better in the winter time than the summer time.”

For those who are homeless, it is especially tricky to stock up: “I use food stamps and food banks, and use the bus and have to carry the food with me, using suitcases and whatnot. When I use feeding programs, I take containers to take some home with me.” But there is no refrigeration available at shelters, making it impossible to keep fresh or prepared foods on hand.

One couple had been successful in finding housing in the past year: “We used to sleep outside under the bridge. We finally got a hotel for a month. Now we have an apartment, with a kitchen and refrigerator!” Sadly, their good fortune was not shared by others in the group who felt a lack of affordable housing was a serious issue in Spokane.

**Health Problems Mount**

Navigating the streets had taken a toll on participants’ health: “I have Crohn’s disease, so I should be eating very selective. I just can’t eat healthy enough and I have some really serious health issues.”

About half did not have access to healthcare. “I can go to an emergency room, but I can’t go get a checkup. Maybe those emergency visits could be prevented if I could see a doctor.

There are things that have happened in the last few years that I need medical attention for, but I have already got $30,000 in bills that I can’t pay.”

One woman said “I have so many bills, SO many bills that I cannot pay. If I ever get a job I am going to get so many checks garnished to pay them. Two years ago I didn’t have any bills, but have had medical conditions and no coverage to pay them. I don’t understand why I can’t get health coverage if I am on food stamps.”

**Don’t Cut Services!**

Everyone in the group urgently felt that they could handle no more cuts to their lifeline supports, from medical care to food stamp benefits. Participants made clear that just getting by in poverty is a great struggle, and the services that help them meet their basic needs are critical to their survival.
Jobs are Scarce

Port Angeles is a town many people pass through on their way to other Olympic Peninsula destinations. But our focus group participants were a mix of long-time and new residents, trying to navigate a changing local economy with too few jobs for everyone.

Almost half of the participants had lost a job in the past year. Some spoke of changes in the logging industry: “We used to work 9-10 months a year, now we work 3-4 months and that’s it. They’re starving us out.” One man is a certified truck driver, but has trouble finding work these days. “I drove a log truck for 32 years, but the logging industry has pretty much melted out.”

Another man recounted his employment challenges: “At one point my employer was covering my medical plan, then he cut my hours back so he could take me off that. Well I’ve worked outside all my life and had a cataract and there is no where I could take care of that. So I had to have him lay me off so I could get state assistance to get my eyes fixed. And I have been trying to get back to work, but there is no work.”

Becoming Hunter/Gatherers

One man described how unemployment affected his ability to feed his family. He used to be able to obtain food through his income when he was working. Then he got laid off and received unemployment, so they used that to eat. “I was getting unemployment and now it’s just gone. Now I am on food stamps and the food bank.”

Participants felt the food bank was right there to support them when they ran out of money. “I get what I can at the food bank, and I get a little bit of food stamps and supplement what I don’t have at grocery stores.” Another woman said her husband fishes and hunts to provide extra food for the family.

Still there were limits on the kinds of food people could access: “I think the healthier stuff is by far more expensive,” said one man, comparing the cost of store-brand plain white bread at $1.79, to healthier whole grain breads at $4.50. He wistfully added, “I can’t remember the
last time I bought a good cut of meat.”

Several participants spoke of the difficulty in getting good prices on food. “Even if you have transportation you are limited. It’s very difficult for people to do comparative shopping in this community.” Another agreed: “That is why the food bank does help. There is a lot of fresh food and vegetables that come through here.”

A woman with diabetes and celiac disease said she can’t eat everything offered at the food bank. “I’ve been ill for a year so my food is very expensive. I have to cook everything from scratch.”

Meanwhile the Basic Food program made a difference: “I work part-time for minimum wage, so I only qualify for $16 in food stamps. That’s a pound of hamburger a week and some milk.”

Another man wearing a shirt that read Do Good said: “I enjoy the [Basic Food] program because it allows me a chance to eat when I wouldn’t be able to otherwise. That is brass tacks. I pay my taxes when I am working but now that I am not, I utilize the service. It was hard to go on when I started, but it helps me eat.”

One woman who had been quiet during most of the group summed up: “You have to be a hunter and a gatherer.”

Still a Caring Community

About half of the group had experienced homelessness. One said “If you are lucky enough to have family, you aren’t homeless but you are not in your own house.”

A woman living with other adults said: “I come from a family that if someone comes over who is hungry, you cook them something. And my problem is I have a problem saying no—I just want to feed everyone.”

“I have been all over and I have never seen a community come together to help like they do here,” said a grateful participant.
### Ocean Park

**Ocean Park Population**: 1,535  
**Pacific County Population**: 22,100

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**Living Through The Storms**

Alongside waves and storms battering their beaches, Ocean Park participants seemed caught in a constant cycle of survival. Behind the tourist destinations, residents experience real struggles, especially in winter. “We’re different here, we’re not like the cities, we’re a community that relies on tourists. We’re poor, really this community is poor.”

Facing over 10% unemployment, people in this area have been out of work a long time. One woman said tearfully she and her husband recently lost their business after 15 years. Another woman said “Even our pawn shop is having trouble staying open.”

Many participants in our Ocean Park group have affordable housing of some kind, with some living in trailers parked on friends’ property. But while there are no jobs to speak of in the area, they can’t afford moving costs or to relocate to an area where housing will be more costly. There was a general sense of feeling stuck in a difficult situation: “We can’t afford to leave here the way things are.”

A woman who worked as a cashier for 25 years said: “I have been looking for two years and have gone back to every place that hires people, and I have been back three or four times and other people are getting hired but I can’t get a job.”

Even a shopping-mall Santa has to commute for work, leaving Ocean Park during the holiday to work in Central Washington.

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**Travel for Food and Health Care**

Several participants talked about needing to travel to access services, quite often across the border into Astoria, OR. The grocery stores on the peninsula were too expensive for the year-round residents on fixed incomes. And while public transportation was affordable, riders said buses didn’t come often enough, had limited hours on Saturdays and no service on Sundays. “You can’t go anyplace after 6 o’clock at night on the bus.”

As a result, half the group worried about running out of food often. One man said, “I’ve learned how to stretch things, I do a lot of crock pot cooking that I never had to do before. I watch cooking shows now and try to learn.” A woman said the end of the month is always hard. “The last two weeks, we’re having bean soup or water gravy with biscuits.”

“My problem is running out of food that is good for me. There is so much in the media now about good nutrition and how important it is for your health and preventing disease. But down here on the lower level of the food chain, where one feels guilty for being down here anyhow, wouldn’t it be nice if we could get multivitamins if we can’t have fruit every day?” said another man.

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**Basic Food Helps Weather Storm**

Over half of the group received food stamps. “I like that they come in handy. I get $28 per month and I don’t spend it until the end of the month. I save it until right about now so I can get milk and eggs and bread.”

One man said “I’ve worked my whole life and just had to go on food stamps because I can’t work anymore because of lung problems.”

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A woman believed the food stamp program would work better if elected officials had to live on her income and food stamps for a year. “See them feed themselves on just $100 in food stamps. That’s the only way they’ll ever realize what’s going on. That would be a real survivor show!”

**Children, Seniors, Disabled Struggle**

Those that were raising children or grandchildren had regrets: “When I hear people say they want to move down here with their families I tell them there is nothing to do for their kids. There is nothing for children.” Another mom who had lived in places with more resources for children said, “The only thing that bothers me is when my kids suffer, that kills me. I’ll go without anything to provide for my kids.”

“I’m real good at doing without,” said a mom. “We rob Peter to pay Paul. We take from one thing to pay another. With water and electric bills, we wait until a day or two before they turn them off before we pay them. We wait that long,” said a mom.

“The thing that gets me is you feel guilty. Why can’t I live on this much money? Social Security says I should be able to, so why can’t I? And one agency doesn’t talk to another one, that’s my big thing,” said one woman. A man responded, “Social Security, whether it’s SSA, SSI, medical, whatever. Those of us that are on it, we worked for it. It’s supposed to be ours, we put into it.”

“I’m on SSI and I’ve been on it a couple of years and I am afraid they are going to take that away. My wife is on public assistance too and they are taking that away in February. We were getting better and now it’s getting worse and worse every single day,” he continued.

“Start steps forward, two steps back.”

**Save our Health Care and Income Supports!**

The group collectively wanted to see their medical care, disability supports, TANF, and food stamps protected. They in turn wanted to support their food bank—volunteering, helping with a community garden, perhaps starting a thrift store to benefit everyone. “We have to realize there are assets among us,” said a woman.
Poverty is Hidden

Several participants in our group agreed that Maple Valley appears as a wealthy or solidly middle class community on the exterior. But the economic boom that expanded Maple Valley, widened the highway, and brought businesses to the community has ended, leaving low-income residents behind.

“We’re country folk,” one participant said. “I don’t think people who have the money realize the need for the money right here in the town. But there are a lot of people just trying to make ends meet.”

A self-employed contractor said: “When I first moved into the community I thought I had enough to get by. But then I got hurt without insurance and that went away. I do have some neighbors who throw some work my way and I thought this was going to be a good year. Now I can’t even get a bid.” He added, “Being self-employed I don’t get a paycheck and I don’t get government assistance. So I’m at my breaking point right now.”

Others saw that the community responded generously once the needs of their neighbors became visible: “This community does so much for this food bank.”

Unemployment Ripples Outward

The end of boom-era construction jobs caused ripples of other joblessness. Our participants voiced a litany of these losses: “I don’t know any contractors who have any work. Even the big ones are cutting back.”

“I essentially got laid off this year. I worked for a bunch of the small contractors and they aren’t hiring.”

“I got laid off a year ago. I was working sales—construction tools, fine tools—and electricians stopped buying.”

“My husband is laid off, he is in industrial steel welding.”

“My husband is a contractor in masonry, and he got laid off this year.”

“My husband gets laid off every winter because he is in tree service work.”

“And when you are older, the younger guys are getting the jobs.”

And then there was a mom who had been a software industry contractor who had also been laid off.

Each participant had various ways of coping with their unemployment. One tried to go back to school for re-training at a community college, but he had to get his GED first, which cost $1,000. “Education costs money which you don’t have when you are laid off.” So his wife struggles to support the family with her fast-food job.

Unemployment Impacts Health

The ripples of losing a job were also impacting participants’ physical health. “My husband was laid off a year ago in April. His Cobra payments are going up; as of September he will have to pay $535 per month, so he won’t have it anymore.” Meanwhile, she has coverage because she is disabled.

Another man said, “I have asthma and I haven’t had insurance since I got laid off. My prescription was still active, but my inhaler was $125 to refill, so I would use it as little as possible.”

Others found a need to travel to Kent, Renton, and Covington for healthcare and social services. And many agreed that dental care was the hardest thing to access, yet poor dental care had a great impact on health and appearances when applying for jobs.

Unemployment Impacts Transportation

Even public transportation favors those with jobs over the unemployed. The bus schedule is geared to commuters, and runs are limited. “It takes forever to get anywhere.”

“With diesel fuel up at $3 per gallon
I need to conserve. It's hard living so far out,” a man said. A woman agreed, “Transportation is the hardest part because I am on Social Security. It's hard to get here to the food bank sometimes.” One man rides his bike to the food bank: “I only have either bus or my bicycle.”

**Juggling Food**

How does one survive years of unemployment? “We share. My friends and I will help each other out, go through our cupboards when they are out of food or they’ll go through theirs when we’re in need.” Another woman said “Sometimes we barter too. We have firewood.”

“Between friends, we juggle food. And that is part of it too, having good friends to lean on.”

A mom was grateful for the food bank's extra help during summer when her children do not have school meals: “In the summertime I bring my kids and that really helps. I am very grateful for that. And there is never enough meat with kids.” There are no summer meal sites for children in Maple Valley; the closest are in Covington, Kent or Auburn.

A mom confessed, “I don’t like eating fast food, but I work at a fast food restaurant, and part of the perks of working there is you get free food. So, I bring free food home to my family, and even though I don’t want to feed them that, I have to.”

One father of children ages 3 and 7 felt bad that he couldn’t provide for his family for the first time in his life; he had just started coming to the food bank the week before: “I just make sure the kids eat first. And they get whatever they need and I can do without if I have to.”

**Juggling Other Basic Needs to Survive**

A woman said she does the money shuffle and is always behind: “I scatter my bills out across the month. I end up living paycheck to paycheck.”

Some participants are able to come to the food bank to get help with their electric bill. Another woman said: “I don’t even touch my thermostat; we keep it at 40 and just burn wood all winter.

One man made his plea to elected officials: “They have to know how serious the situation is. Right now there are hundreds of people who are about to become homeless. People fall into the cracks left and right. And it’s tragic.”

**SELF-SUFFICIENCY STANDARD**

*Monthly income needed for self-sufficiency for a family of four in South King County: $4,628.*

The Federal Poverty Level (FPL*) for a family of four for 2010 was $1,838 per month.

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$4,628

The Federal Poverty Level (FPL*) for a family of four for 2010 was $1,838 per month.

Number of low-income residents with incomes at or below 200% FPL (2009 est.): 420,453 (22%)

Unemployment rate (10/10): 8.4%

**Total persons served**

DSHS (June 2010):

- Basic Food (food stamps, 2010): 204,135
- Medical assistance (2010): 217,880
- Disability Lifeline (2010): 12,382
- WIC (2009 annual total unduplicated clients): 67,198
- Schoolchildren receiving free and reduced-price meals (10/09, Tahoma School District): 951 (13%)
As you have heard from focus group participants’ experiences, having enough food to eat is driven by multiple factors sometimes beyond one’s own control. While low-income people have creatively juggled food and bills to survive, the impact of record-breaking unemployment during the recession has taken a crushing toll on our neighbors across the state.

As Washington State faces an unprecedented budget deficit due to the recession, our focus group participants remind us that low-income people cannot bear the brunt of more budget cuts. In the 2011 legislative session, low-income people face the elimination of the State Food Assistance program for legal immigrants, Basic Health medical coverage, and Disability Lifeline, among other cuts. These program cuts present life-threatening challenges to the most vulnerable residents of our state.

Northwest Harvest also knows that local food banks and meal programs have already been stretched beyond capacity to meet increased needs during the recession. The charitable hunger response system alone cannot adequately provide for the increased numbers of people in need that we will see from the elimination of basic safety net programs. The result of such deep cuts will be disastrous for families, for communities and for our state; the negative impacts of the cuts will last well beyond our current recession.

When it comes to hunger, we simply cannot do it alone. We know that eliminating hunger requires addressing its root causes. Families experience hunger because they do not have adequate income to meet all of their basic needs.

Northwest Harvest firmly believes we all have a role to play in ending hunger, including local, state and federal governments. We advocate for sufficient investment in key public structures that promote both access to nutritious food and basic economic security for low-income families. We invite you to join our fight against hunger by advocating to protect a sound, reliable and accessible public-private safety net for low-income families in Washington.

“Two years ago I didn’t have any bills, but have had medical conditions and no coverage to pay them. I don’t understand why I can’t get health coverage if I am on food stamps.”
Following are comments on terms and data included in the report that accompany the participants’ stories.

Hungry in Washington 2010

Each year, Children’s Alliance uses USDA data to determine food insecurity and hunger in Washington State. 2010 figures indicate the highest levels recorded since reporting began in 1995. Washington now ranks as 13th hungriest and the 17th most food insecure state in the nation. (See reference on page 19.)

Population

New population estimates from the 2010 Decennial Census indicate population growth in Washington, and new county level data will be available in 2011.

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-aged child). The guidelines we used come from The Self-Sufficiency Standard for Washington State, developed by Dr. Diana Pearce and updated in 2009. 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 vividly demonstrate that many families above the official poverty guideline fall short of having the resources necessary to meet their basic needs.

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 of three, 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, healthcare and childcare taking a significantly larger share of a household budget.

Researchers and policymakers are building consensus that a new poverty measure is needed. In 2009, Rep. Jim McDermott of Washington co-sponsored The Measuring American Poverty (MAP) Act, to create a Modern Poverty Measure reflecting the current costs of food, housing, clothing, shelter and utilities – plus an additional amount for personal expenses, such as non-work-related transportation, and household supplies. In the fall of 2011, the U.S. Census Bureau will release a Supplemental Poverty Measure, but it will not replace the official measure or have an impact on federal allocations.

Until there is a new measure, we report data using the percentages of the current federal poverty line, and comparing with the Self-Sufficiency Standard.

200% of the federal poverty level

In three of the five communities the monthly income needed for self-sufficiency is more than 200% of the federal poverty guidelines, ranging from 209% in Spokane County to 225% in Clallam County to 252% 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.

Unemployment Rate

This number does not count those who have given up looking for work or those who are underemployed. We use September 2010 figures, since they represent available data closest to the focus group timeframe.
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 EBT card to participants to be used for food purchases. SNAP benefits are the most important domestic food assistance program. In the State of Washington in fiscal year 2010, nearly one million residents utilized Basic Food benefits (an increase of 20% from 2009), including 14,000 legal immigrants and refugees who access a state-only funded program called State Food Assistance. This SFA program is being proposed for elimination in the 2011 legislative session, meaning a loss of benefits for our newest Washingtonians and their families.

Medical Assistance

The DSHS Medical Assistance data we cite here includes all coverage groups, including the numerous Medicaid programs available, both state and federally funded. In 2010, there were over one-million people receiving medical assistance statewide. Many of these state-funded benefits face significant and life-threatening cuts in the 2011 legislative session.

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. In 2010, 161,397 people statewide received TANF cash benefits, an increase of 9% over 2009.

Disability Lifeline

The General Assistance (GA-U/GA-X) program was renamed Disability Lifeline by the state legislature in March 2010. It provides 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. In 2010 there were 39,666 clients receiving Disability Lifeline benefits statewide. The state Department of Social and Health Services has reduced the typical monthly cash grant from $339 per month to $258 per month effective Jan. 1, 2011. The program faces elimination in the 2011 legislative session.

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 fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grain breads and tortillas, tofu, and soy beverages, in addition to previously approved purchases of milk, eggs, juice, cheese, beans, peanut butter, and infant formula. The program served 51% of all infants born in the state and over 67% of infants born in rural areas; 313,000 pregnant and breastfeeding women, infants and children were served by the program in 2009. Working families made up 69% of WIC participants, yet 63% of families were living on poverty-level incomes. Over 14,000 WIC clients were in the military or were from military families.

National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program

These federal programs provide nutritionally-balanced free or reduced-price meals to children in public and nonprofit private schools. In Washington State the reduced price category was eliminated for breakfasts so that all children who qualify receive free meals; the reduced price category for the lunch program in Kindergarten through 3rd grade was also eliminated. These important changes improved access to school meals for lower-income families. In academic year 2009-10, 433,017 (42%) of schoolchildren in Washington were eligible to receive free or reduced-price school lunches. The passage of the Healthy, Hunger Free Kids Act by Congress in December 2010 will mean some improvements in school nutrition options for children.
“My problem is running out of food that is good for me.”

“Vegetables are so expensive anymore, especially in the winter. Even apples are $2 per pound, so you can’t afford to eat apples.”

REFERENCES


7 Washington State Department of Social and Health Services, Economic Services Administration Briefing Book for State Fiscal Year (SFY) 2010: Basic Food Program. ACES data provided in draft form by DSHS staff 12-10. Available 1-11 at: <http://www.dshs.wa.gov/esa/esbriefingbook.shtml#esa>

8 Washington State Department of Social and Health Services, Economic Services Administration Briefing Book for State Fiscal Year (SFY) 2010: Medical Assistance Program. ACES data as of October 2010, provided in draft form by DSHS staff 12-10. Available 1-11 at: <http://www.dshs.wa.gov/esa/esbriefingbook.shtml#esa>

9 Washington State Department of Social and Health Services, Economic Services Administration Briefing Book for State Fiscal Year (SFY) 2010: TANF/WorkFirst Program. ACES data provided in draft form by DSHS staff 12-10. Available 1-11 at: <http://www.dshs.wa.gov/esa/esbriefingbook.shtml#esa>

10 Washington State Department of Social and Health Services, Economic Services Administration Briefing Book for State Fiscal Year (SFY) 2010: Disability Lifeline Program. ACES data provided in draft form by DSHS staff 12-10. Available 1-11 at: <http://www.dshs.wa.gov/esa/esbriefingbook.shtml#esa>

