

CENTERING *Community Voice* in Food Access

THE FRUIT AND VEGETABLE INCENTIVES PROGRAM'S
COMMUNITY ADVISORY NETWORK
2021 INAUGURAL REPORT





Introduction

Access to affordable, nutritious foods is often challenging for people living with limited incomes. Their household budget must cover all necessities such as rent, utilities, and childcare, in addition to buying food. When there is not enough income from earnings and other sources of assistance, impossible choices must be made to afford the essentials. Meals are skipped if it means keeping a roof overhead or the water running.

For communities of color, generations of systemic racism have resulted in disproportionate rates of hunger and poverty. According to [Washington Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System](#), the prevalence for food insecurity for Black and Hispanic adults is more than double their White peers in Washington.¹

Access issues are made worse in these communities due to institutional practices, such as redlining, that results in decreased property values and lack of business investments in lower income neighborhoods. These neighborhoods tend to have fewer retail options and, as a result, less access to affordable produce and other more nutritious food options.

Acknowledging and addressing these issues has helped Washington be better prepared to offer resources to struggling households. In 2020, only 8.8 percent of Washington residents experienced food insecurity, despite the COVID-19 recession.² Nutrition assistance programs, like Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)/Basic Food, school meals, and Women, Infant, and Children (WIC) are credited with keeping Washington's overall rates of food insecurity in check. The fast response, expansive options, and increase in spending of these programs helped ensure that struggling households could afford food and pay other bills. It helped stimulate local economies while giving sustenance to those challenged with unemployment or reduced paychecks.

¹ Washington State Department of Health, "[Chronic Disease Profiles](#)." Accessed December 14, 2021.

² Alisha Coleman-Jensen, Matthew P. Rabbitt, Christian A. Gregory, and Anita Singh. 2021. Household Food Security in the United States in 2020, ERR-298, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service.



The CAN and providing feedback on the FVIP have meant being able to connect with people who are working directly on the front lines of ending food insecurity and having my concerns heard.

— CAN Member



History of the Fruit and Vegetable Incentives Program

One nutrition assistance program is the Fruit and Vegetable Incentive Program (FVIP). In 2015, the Department of Health (DOH) began coordinating fruit and vegetable incentive programs with farmers markets, grocery stores, and healthcare systems. These programs received support from dozens of local and state partners, and initial funding from a US Department of Agriculture Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentives (FINI) grant. They provided people with limited incomes extra money to buy fruits and vegetables.

Along with program operations, DOH convened local and state partners as part of an Advisory Network to drive conversations and coordination on program sustainability/ funding, cohesive communication, and program evaluation.

Due to the success of these incentive programs, and with support from the Advisory Network, the Washington State Legislature passed legislation in 2019 to create Washington’s FVIP, administered by DOH.



Creation of the Community Advisory Network (CAN)

In 2019, DOH conducted a participatory evaluation of the Fruit and Vegetable Prescriptions subprogram, using Photovoice sessions with participants in Seattle, Yakima, and Spokane. Some of the Seattle participants were able to share their experience during the 2019 annual Advisory Network meeting. As a result of their sharing, it became apparent that the voice of people who use the program is critically important. Therefore, when the department received funding from the USDA for a Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program (GusNIP, previously called FINI) in 2020, a critical activity was to contract with Northwest Harvest to coordinate and convene a Community Advisory Network (CAN) to capture this feedback. This network would be made up of people who use FVIP subprograms, to provide input and feedback on future program development.

This report documents the first year of activities of CAN. We are sharing:

- Our founding principles and values
- Demographic representation of our members
- A summary of our major activities and recommendations

Fruit and Vegetable Incentives Programs

**SNAP Match Programs,
for people who use
SNAP/Basic Food**

**Fruit and Vegetable Prescriptions,
for people experiencing food
insecurity and have, or are at-risk
for, a chronic health condition**

CAN's Founding Principles

The purpose of CAN is to gather and document input from individuals who use FVIP—to improve access and contribute to planning for future development of the program.

Northwest Harvest is the organization that coordinates and convenes the CAN. Northwest Harvest is a statewide food justice organization that works with a statewide network of over 370 food distribution partners to increase equitable access to nutritious food. It was contracted by DOH to recruit and facilitate meetings of CAN.

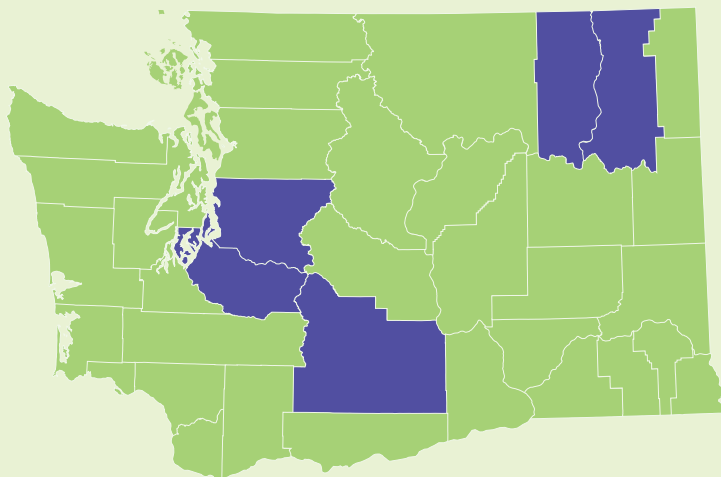
Northwest Harvest's theory of change to create a more equitable food system centers on racial equity. Northwest Harvest believes that centering the experiences of BIPOC communities helps develop solutions that remove barriers to participation for people of color. It will improve access for all who use these services.

This principle guided Northwest Harvest's priorities for recruitment of CAN membership: to ensure that the majority of CAN members identify as Black, Indigenous, or other People of Color. Northwest Harvest also wanted to ensure geographic diversity across Eastern, Western, and Central Washington to address access issues in rural, urban, and suburban settings.

CAN's Demographic Representation

This year, CAN membership is comprised of eight individuals across Washington state.

(Members reside in Ferry, King, Stevens, Pierce, and Yakima counties.)



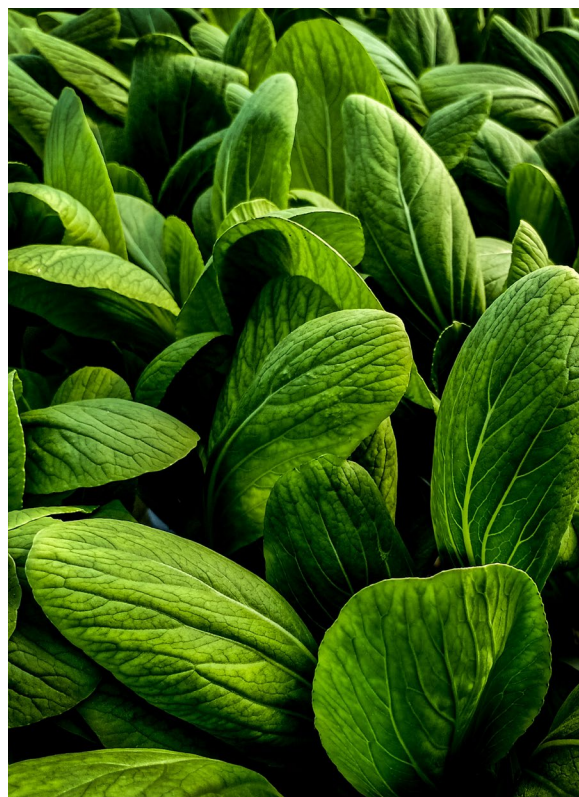
Two identify as male and six identify as female



Over 60% identify as Black, Indigenous, or other People of color



Five members have school aged children living with them



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As a SNAP participant FVIP gives me hope that I will continue to be able to afford to eat a diet that is wholesome and preventative of/to health trouble.

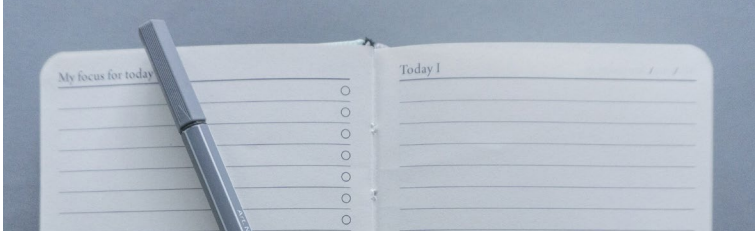
— CAN Member

CAN's values

The CAN meets monthly. In our first meeting, in January 2021, we worked in collaboration with Northwest Harvest staff to develop the following values to guide how we work with and relate with one another:

1 **We are committed to highlighting and emphasizing first-person voice and experiences in relation to food insecurity and poverty.**

When we prioritize the experiences of those who are experiencing food insecurity and poverty, we improve the quality of food assistance programs. We are committed to learning from firsthand experiences about barriers to access and participation. Then we will hold ourselves accountable, working in collaboration with our first-person experts to revise our program design accordingly.



2 **We will compensate our members for their time, contributions to discussion, and sharing of their experiences.**

First-person experts live busy lives. They may be juggling school, jobs, raising children full-time, and other priorities, but with less reliable transportation, income, or support. Sharing experiences of struggles can be traumatizing, even more so when in the presence of those who provide the services they rely on. We will compensate our members with gift cards and stipends to support the technology needed to participate in our meetings, their time, and the effort they invest in this network.



3 **We will work to ensure that our work with one another is not transactional, but instead, is built on—and deepens relationships with—respect and dignity.**

We will seek to minimize the impact of power dynamics between CAN members, Northwest Harvest staff, and other participants in our meetings. We will strive to build relationships, get to know, and respect one another. We will share power so that decision making is collective and built on collaboration.



Even though I am a SNAP participant, in the past, because of financial shortcomings, I have struggled to adequately provide proper nutrition for myself and I'm hoping that in the future I will have more opportunity to eat a healthy diet without any financial restriction. I am looking forward to any and all expansion of SNAP programs so that I'll be able to continue to eat a healthy diet even after the current emergency pandemic relief is discontinued.

— CAN Member



Major Activities for 2021

CAN provided feedback for marketing and rebranding of FVIP's grocery store incentives' logo and messaging.

In March 2021, CAN was presented with 3 different decisions that were being made to the branding and marketing outreach of grocery store component of FVIP. Our feedback focused on:

- Ensuring that future marketing and branding specifies, clearly and boldly, that shoppers will be receiving incentives for only produce.
- Changing the colors of the logos to a more eye-catching scheme. And using the logos consistently in materials, to help generate instant awareness of FVIP.
- Targeting marketing and outreach of FVIP towards underserved communities (i.e., rural and historically marginalized communities). Shoppers should be able to come back to a familiar source or place for information and updates on FVIP logistics.



The colors of the logo were changed to a more eye-catching scheme, due to feedback from CAN.



FVIP helps me think more carefully about the foods I choose to buy for my family and to make better meal choices.

— CAN Member



CAN gave input and feedback to FVIP legislative rulemaking.

In June 2021, CAN was provided a draft of FVIP legislative rules. DOH is mandated to develop program rules that will become Washington Administrative Code (WAC). WAC will be used to determine which retailers can participate in the incentive programs and how the programs will operate. We appreciated the opportunity to transparently provide feedback and suggestions during the rulemaking process. Based on feedback and questions, the draft rules were adapted to include 'culturally relevant' foods in the program purpose.

CAN contributed to the retailer selection process and added more retailers to FVIP, across the state.

We often expressed a desire to see more retailers participate in SNAP Produce Match. After reviewing the draft legislative rules, it became clearer what the requirements are for retailers to participate in FVIP. In summer and fall 2021, DOH accepted applications for interested retailers to participate in SNAP Produce Match. In October, CAN provided feedback on the selection process for new retailers and suggested popular stores for program expansion in rural locations.

CAN shared first-person experiences about food assistance programs.

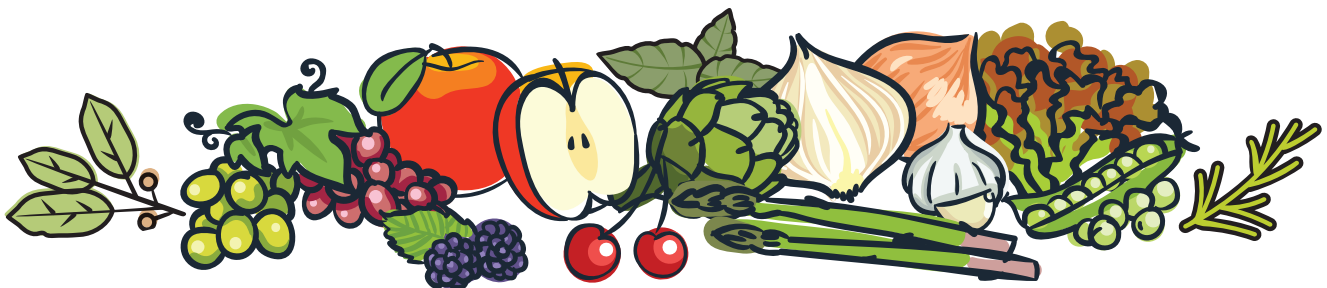
In addition to dedicating time and efforts to advocate for improvements to FVIP, CAN members have also shared their experiences in other efforts related to building more equitable policies for food justice:

- In May 2021, several members of our members participated in a listening session and submitted written comments to USDA on updates to the Thrifty Food Plan, which is used to calculate SNAP benefits. These community feedback efforts contributed to USDA's decision to modernize the Thrifty Food Plan, the result of which is a 21 percent increase to the SNAP benefit amounts. That increase does not include the temporary increases to SNAP due to COVID. Now, the average SNAP benefit is about \$5.50 per day (previously it was around \$4.25 per day).
- One of our CAN members had an opportunity to talk in a small group setting, at the request of Congresswoman Kim Schrier, about the adequacy of SNAP benefits. They helped illustrate the concrete challenges of affording an adequately nutritious and varied diet when living on a fixed income, provided by Social Security Disability and a modest monthly SNAP benefit of \$50.
- Members of CAN wrote about how child nutrition programs, like universal school meals, the Pandemic EBT program, and the expanded Child Tax Credit have helped their families. These stories were shared with permission by Northwest Harvest in communications about federal advocacy efforts.
- Three CAN members participate in an advisory committee, convened by Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) and DOH, to design a program for integrating our SNAP incentives with our EBT system so that incentives earned will be distributed on EBT instead of paper vouchers. This will facilitate the use of incentives in purchasing transactions.
- In November 2021, a member of CAN gave a presentation about CAN's activities and the value of participation in the CAN to the broader FVIP Advisory Network.

Looking Ahead

The early success of the CAN model has resulted in an opportunity for CAN to provide community input and share first-person expertise with SNAP-Ed, another state program. The SNAP-Ed program is administered by DSHS to increase the likelihood that people who are eligible for SNAP make health food choices within a limited budget and choose physically active lifestyles consistent with the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* and federal food guidance. In the new year, CAN will work with SNAP-Ed to provide input on priority interventions, funding allocations, and issues that people face accessing healthy foods and being physically active.

These are important opportunities for CAN members. We appreciate the efforts to bring us to the discussion table and share in decision-making on programs that are helping us put food on the dinner table.



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