

Addressing the Food Security Crisis in Washington

Introduction

Food is a basic right. Nutritious food is an essential ingredient for the good health that is needed to work jobs and learn at schools. When all in Washington have equitable access to nutritious food, our communities can thrive on the contributions of all who can be more active and independent if they do not have to worry where their next meal will come from.

But COVID-19 poses a deeper and longer lasting health threat even after we can safely inoculate ourselves from the virus—a public health crisis of food insecurity and poverty. In March, Gov. Inslee appointed a Food Security Coordination Team made up of state agencies and community-based partners, including Northwest Harvest. Our goal: don't trade one public health crisis for another. We want to get ahead of food insecurity with rapid assessment and reassessment of need, cataloguing of available public and private resources, and adjusting the distribution of those resources equitably to meet emerging gaps in services.

To inform our response to the food insecurity crisis, Northwest Harvest commissioned an in-depth report to create a rapid perspective on supply and demand for resources needed to promote food security in our state. This policy brief provides an overview of the findings from the report's projection models and our public policy recommendations to expand the resources needed to contain the public health crisis of hunger in Washington.

Key Findings

- Timely and critical **expansions of cash assistance and cash-equivalent programs like SNAP, have been essential to containing food insecurity**, but those expansions are set to expire later this year. Depending on the expiration of those benefits expansions and accompanying increases in poverty, **the peak of Washington's food insecurity crisis may occur in August or December 2020.**
- During that peak period, **2.2 million people or roughly one-quarter of Washington's population will struggle to put food on their tables**, and **900,000 of these individuals (41%) will struggle with hunger**, a chronic and persistent disruption in food intake that can lead to deterioration of health¹.
- 88% of the people in Washington who are most at risk of job loss or disruption because of COVID-19 have incomes below \$70,000 per year.

¹ Food insecurity is used here as the equivalent of the US Department of Agriculture's definition of "low food security" and hunger is the equivalent of USDA's definition of "very low food security." According to USDA, low food security is characterized by a lack of variety, quality, or desirability of diet, while very low food security is characterized by multiple experiences of disruptions in eating patterns and reduced food intake. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/definitions-of-food-security.aspx>

- **60% of those most at risk of job disruption have annual incomes at or below \$40,000**
- Jobs that are at most risk of disruption are **disproportionately held by people of color**, particularly Hispanics (13.1%), **and people who do not have a college degree (78.4%)**.
- During the peak period of need, **the projected cost to fully address our food insecurity crisis will be \$115 million per month²**.

Cash Assistance is Essential for Prevention

According to the study, direct cash payments and cash-equivalent programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, Basic Food, formerly “food stamps) are the critical tools in helping to contain food insecurity and hunger. This is common sense: these programs help struggling households buy food and pay for essential needs after sudden job loss or reduced hours due to work slowdowns and business closures necessary to contain the spread of COVID-19.

In particular, expansions to unemployment benefits provided by the CARES Act, extends unemployment insurance to many people whose jobs are most vulnerable to disruption during the pandemic. This enhanced federal assistance provides an additional \$600 per week, and for 60% of this population, that amount makes up for the loss of wages. In other words, enhanced unemployment benefits are helping those in the lowest wage brackets from suffering further economic setback.

But those enhanced benefits are set to expire on July 31, 2020. Unless our state or Congress takes action to extend these improvements to unemployment benefits, we will see a significant loss in resources that are helping struggling households purchase food directly from grocery stores and retailers. The study projects that an end to this substantial resource and accompanying growth in poverty will mean that food insecurity in Washington will peak in August or December. During that peak need season, the gap between need and the available resources to supply that need will grow so that the cost to fully address food security in our state will be \$115 million per month.

The message is clear: an enhanced safety net, specifically, robust direct cash payments and cash equivalent benefits, are essential for Washington to pull ahead of the curve to avoid a catastrophic crisis of hunger.

² The gap is the difference between the total spending by food secure households versus food insecure households and accounts for the added resources provided by public benefits including cash and cash equivalent resources (e.g. SNAP), government commodities (TEFAP), and charitable contributions from the private sector to support food bank operations and food purchasing for distribution.

Public Policy Recommendations

Enhanced cash and cash equivalent assistance helps contain our food insecurity crisis by empowering struggling, displaced workers with the ability to buy food directly from grocery stores and pay for other essential needs. We must make these enhancements permanent and extend these programs to be more inclusive of immigrant and communities of color who are disproportionately impacted by job loss and disruptions from this virus.

- **Make permanent reforms to federal and state unemployment benefits programs** to reflect the current enhancements provided by the Pandemic Unemployment Benefits program in the CARES Act. The CARES Act extended federal unemployment benefits to traditionally left out employees including self-employed, independent contractors, people with limited work histories, and those who left their jobs for compelling family reasons. These are important changes that reflect our modern jobs economy and should be made permanent. Washington should go the extra mile and create a relief fund that can provide unemployment, paid sick leave, and other cash assistance for undocumented immigrant workers who have been laid off due to the virus and who are not eligible for other federal or state programs.

Expand and issue another round of stimulus cash checks. The Recovery Rebates were issued to most moderate- and lower-income households to help keep our economy running as households spend their checks as they see fit. Congress should authorize another issuance of stimulus checks, preferably later this year if there is no extension of enhanced unemployment benefits. Congress should also expand the stimulus checks program to include immigrant workers that pay taxes. [In Washington, state lawmakers should provide an immediate state cash stimulus payment modeled off of the federal Recovery Rebates program, targeted to households with low incomes and include ITIN filers \(immigrant workers without Social Security Numbers who file tax returns using a ITIN.\)](#)

- **Expand tax credits for moderate- and lower-income brackets, including the Earned Income Tax Credit and the Child Care Tax Credit.** In particular, EITC should expand the eligibility and amount for qualifying childless workers. In Washington, our state should fund and expand the Working Families Tax Credit to include ITIN filers and unpaid caregivers.
- **Expand SNAP benefits so that struggling households can afford basic nutrition.** SNAP is our first line of defense against hunger. It is perfectly situated to mitigate the public health crisis of hunger and our economic crisis. With increased SNAP benefits, struggling households can buy more nutritious food, keeping our economies running while keeping themselves healthy for work or to learn in school. We are long overdue to strengthen SNAP including doing the following:
 - Raise the maximum benefits amounts by 15%;
 - Update the basis of SNAP allotments from USDA's Thrifty Food Plan to the Low-Cost Food Plan so that benefits levels can better meet modern day prices for a basic daily diet; and
 - Suspend the implementation of harmful administrative rule changes that will take away SNAP eligibility or drastically cut benefits from vulnerable households.
- **Increase funding for operations costs and cold storage capacity for food banks.** The pandemic has brought out the generosity of the private sector and lawmakers creating pathways for increased donations and purchasing of fresh, perishable foods from our farms

for distribution at our food banks, but those efforts will go to waste unless we enhance the infrastructure and capacity to safely store and transport food product. Increased support for operations and cold storage capacity is needed or else programs will either have to turn away nutritious food or send it to the landfill if it can't be safely placed in the hands of those who need it.

- **Increase state and local rent and mortgage assistance programs.** Hunger persists because households with limited incomes are forced to make choices between essential needs. Meals can be skipped if the money for food can instead be diverted to pay to keep a roof over your head and other less flexible costs when the bills come in. Even though the state has extended moratoriums on rent and mortgage payments, renters and homeowners will face a severe fiscal crisis when the moratoriums end and owe landlords and lenders back pay on missed payments. Increasing rent and mortgage assistance will help households afford both food and housing.
- **Washington must adopt new sustainable and equitable funding resources.** Washington must reject a scarcity mindset that uses harsh spending cuts to balance our budget in order to perpetuate our upside-down tax code. Human services programs are frequently the targets for budget cuts as there is little else in our state budget that is discretionary and not otherwise obligated by contract or law. We can't afford to cut these programs when more people than ever rely on our safety net. We can have the resources needed to help moderate- and lower-income households if we clean up our tax code.

Conclusion

Washington has been enduring a seemingly endless period of crisis and uncertainty, thanks to COVID-19. Luckily, the quick action of Congress to do the right thing and enhance our safety net has proven that cash payments to help reduce the pain of sudden job loss and cash equivalent programs like SNAP are highly effective in staving off hunger. Now is the time to act to make these changes permanent. A robust safety net is one that provides sufficiently adequate benefits and is inclusive to target relief for immigrants and people of color—those who are disproportionately impacted by the loss or disruption of lower wage jobs. This is critical, not just for preventing the crisis from reaching catastrophic heights, but to help pave the way for an equitable recovery. We must take this course of action if we want to mean it when we say that we are all in this crisis together.

