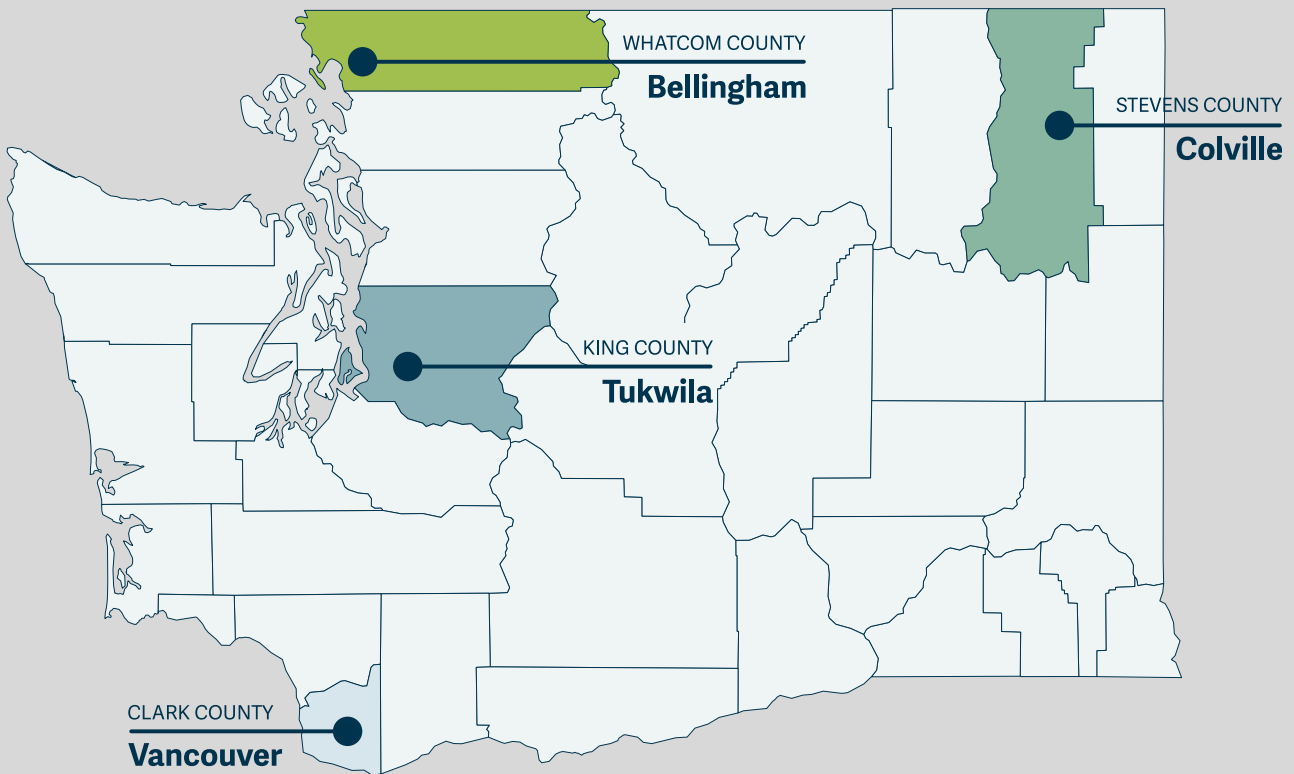


# Focus on Food Security

## Northwest Harvest's Listening Session Report 2022



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## Northwest Harvest

### About Northwest Harvest

Northwest Harvest is an anti-racist, anti-oppression food justice organization in Washington state. Focused on ensuring equitable access to nutritious food and building partnerships in communities across the state, we work with over 400 food banks, meal programs, schools and community based organizations to get food to communities where it's most needed. Part of a justice-centered movement, we advocate to change inequitable policies, practices, and institutions that perpetuate hunger and poverty. Through collective action, we ensure communities across our state can access the nutritious food they want and need to thrive.

### Get Involved

To learn more about the advocacy efforts of Northwest Harvest, please feel free to reach out to our team at: [advocacy@northwestharvest.org](mailto:advocacy@northwestharvest.org) or subscribe to our advocacy alerts at [northwestharvest.org/get-involved/advocacy](http://northwestharvest.org/get-involved/advocacy).



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### Land Acknowledgement ■

We acknowledge that Northwest Harvest hosted our listening sessions on the traditional lands of the the first peoples of what is now called Washington State. These buildings stand on land once belonging to the Multnomah, Stl'pulmsh (Cowlitz), uxwsa'7aq (Nooksack), Duwamish, Muckleshoot, Stillaguamish, Lhaq'temish (Lummi), Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation, Yakama, and škwáxčənəx<sup>w</sup> (Moses-Columbia).

We honor all the indigenous people of the land we now occupy: past, present, and future. We are deeply grateful for the many ways you contribute your resources, time, and partnership towards our shared vision of ending hunger—a problem that did not always persist in this region.

### Team & Community Acknowledgements ■

This statewide endeavor would not have been possible without the wholehearted and enthusiastic support of the communities we interviewed, the advocacy team of Northwest Harvest, and our generous host facilities.

### Letter from Thomas Reynolds, CEO of Northwest Harvest ■

Northwest Harvest is pleased to publish the 13th edition of our Focus on Food Security report. This report details stories of hunger and resilience from folks with lived experiences of poverty. It also identifies the policy solutions that can help us achieve advancements in food security and economic stability for every person in Washington.

We are humbled by the generosity of our focus group participants who shared their lives, answering our questions about barriers to accessing nutritious food, health care, housing, transportation, and other essential needs. And this year, we heard from more than ever before; with 90+ listening session partners whom each brought their own lived experience of poverty.

We are inspired by their strength in the face of adversity, their adaptations, and hard work to keep their heads above water. We are also anguished by the toll that worry and fear resulting from food insecurity is taking on their physical and mental well-being. We believe this report is not just a testament to their tenacity but is a call to action for all of us to work collectively. Hunger harms all of us. Forming the solutions to end hunger will take all of us.

Northwest Harvest thanks the efforts of every partner who worked to make certain the listening sessions hosted across the state were successful and enlightening. We are grateful to be able to convey not only the tireless work of our allies and co-conspirators but to share the dialogue that is critical to reducing hunger.

As you read this report, absorbing the data and stories alike, my hope is that you will see opportunities to join us in growing food justice through collective action to eliminate hunger, poverty, and the economic conditions that too many families across Washington must face.

Thomas Reynolds,  
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER



ECONOMIC DATA  
AT A GLANCE  
**Statewide**

**All people in poverty (2020): 9.5%**  
**Children in poverty: 11%**  
**Median household income: \$82,400**

**Median rent: \$1,439**  
**2021 Unemployment rate: 5.2%**

It has been nearly five years since Northwest Harvest published our last Focus on Food Security Report, since then the realities of families and individuals across the state have changed drastically and, in many ways, for the worse. Hardships always surfaced in these reports in the past but the struggles of the people we spoke with have never been more acute. By this we mean the COVID-19 pandemic punctuated the shift for millions of families from food, housing, and basic needs security to insecurity.

**431,300 JOBS LOST**  
between March and May '20

These stats, while troubling on their own, only paint part of the picture. We heard in every listening session how the pandemic impacted all facets of life for folks -- from worrying about their economic security to accessing public benefits for the first time to housing stability.

The list of day-to-day struggles ranged, and the stories were each tinted with varying levels of tenacity and turbulence, but the single common thread through these lived experiences was the desire for their future to not be defined by the undertow of poverty, hunger, and struggling to meet basic needs.

With that in mind, as Washington's leaders and communities reckon with the newfound realities of 2023 and beyond, it's critical to remember that behind every statistic, there is a real person struggling to get by. Families across our state continue to depend on lawmakers and the government as an entire enterprise to make the right decisions. Decisions that will not only impact their everyday life for the better but will ripple through generations of Washingtonians in the years to come as we recover from the pandemic.

This isn't to say policies and programs informed by community up to this point have been a net negative. To the contrary, we've seen policy choices that are proactive and flexible, and that meet the needs of individuals and families alike. We saw the effectiveness of federal direct cash policy like the Child Tax Credit lift millions of children and families out of poverty nationally. We've tested and proven the feasibility of providing free school meals to more than half of K-12 students right here in Washington.

**LOW (16%) and VERY LOW (30%)**

Food security was highest among **unemployed population** in WA food study

**VERY LOW FOOD SECURITY...**

was highest among WA food study respondents identifying as non-Hispanic Black, Hispanic, American Indian/Alaska Native, and Native Hawai'ian/ Other Pacific Islanders

These are steps in the right direction, with much more work to be done. In this report, you'll find stories and ideas alike that speak to the reality of public policy decisions changing lives for the better.

To best honor this idea, we've broken down our report differently than in years past. Instead of focusing on stories county by county, we're divvying this report into issue areas that are reflective of the people we interviewed and the experiences we heard. Moreover, we believe this structuring change challenges the notion that policy decisions should or could be made in a silo. Instead, we will offer policies ideas that uphold targeted universalism, or setting universal goals and achieving them through targeted approaches based on how disparate groups are situated socioeconomically, culturally, and across geographies.

This is an intentional strategy, and one that elevates what exactly we believe it will take for us to collectively build an equitable future that ensures nobody faces food insecurity along with the other tolls of poverty. In this vein, we learned much about the tools we have and should use in our policy and programmatic toolboxes.

We learned by listening and creating an environment in which folks felt understood and heard. However, as we use these tools and embark on this work, this must be the norm for all of us in the policy arena.

Until we understand, on the same level of clarity that our participants have experienced, we will find ourselves stretching to achieve this ambitious goal.

As J.P., one of our Bellingham listening session participants puts it, “you need to walk in our shoes...you can sit there and judge, criticize all you want but if don’t know why they’re smoking that cigarette, medicating themselves, fighting their own fights...you can’t fix anything.”

## Focus on Food Security

### Economic Security & Stability ■

An unreliable economy, marked by post-pandemic recovery measures and fear of an impending recession, means that families already struggling to make ends meet feel the bumps and bruises of economic turmoil even more. And there has been plenty of turmoil, as noted in the introduction of this report, with significant recovery still ongoing from the downturn of the pandemic.

One reliable answer to questions about everyday spending and financial stability was that inflation, particularly the skyrocketing costs of food and fuel, overshadowed virtually every purchasing decision made. The decision between paying for gas to get a job or putting food on the table was not abstract, it’s a substantial choice with enormous consequences.

“

*I have a family of 5 (myself, husband and 3 kids). What we used to spend on a weekly budget, it cannot sustain the same amount of food that we used to buy maybe a year ago. That means we need to compromise healthier options for quicker and mostly processed foods, because those tend to be less expensive.*

*With growing boys, I need to stretch whatever I can to ensure I’m feeding them as best as possible so they don’t feel the struggle that we do as adults, when it comes to food security.*

— KIM, STEVENS COUNTY

Stories like Kim’s underscore the day-to-day economic reality of many Washington families. The painful decisions of picking and choosing between basic needs, or which go unmet, shouldn’t be yet another burden on the shoulders of working families and individuals. Painful choices shouldn’t be the default, but we know that isn’t the case for far too many families like Kim’s across the state.

**1 IN 3 PARTICIPANTS** cited costs of food and fuel as a primary concern for their financial health.

More broadly, people of color, women, and immigrants are overrepresented in many low-paying, often frontline, jobs<sup>4</sup>. This is in large part owing to institutional and systemic barriers. Barriers, for instance, like wealth and income inequity and disparity, inadequate access to non-employer-based healthcare, and bias in hiring.

As a result, these communities are disproportionately likely to be paid wages that do not provide for their basic needs.

As more Washingtonians find themselves concerned with stretching their dollar further, there are policies we can execute that are both easily achieved through thoughtful implementation and flexible enough to meet the needs of a wide swath of the population.

Through direct cash policies, highlighted more below, we can actively prioritize both dignity of choice for recipients and bolster the spending power of those who need it the most.

The autonomy of decision-making is a significant and deeply meaningful piece of the economic empowerment puzzle.

We heard repeatedly that direct cash policies empower families, especially through federal direct cash policies, including the Child Tax Credit, and state-level strategies that are still (functionally) in their infancy, such as the Working Families Tax Credit and a guaranteed basic income (GBI). As we explore the options on the table, one recurring theme will surface and resurface: the imperative is that whatever policy lever is pulled, the benefit(s) are rooted in autonomy and ensuring that the purchasing power of said benefit(s) is sufficient for those who need it the most.

With a GBI benefit in place for Washingtonians with lower incomes we've seen a multitude of studies point to an increase in economic mobility, improve health, and well-being. With that said, the caveat is that sufficient targeting strategies and appropriate funding must be in place to best ensure a reliably effective benefit.

But a GBI isn't the only state-level, direct cash benefit that can play a significant role in securing economic stability. Washington made history in 2021 by passing and funding the Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC), a unique direct-cash benefit that will provide millions of dollars in financial relief to working families.

Beginning in February 2023, eligible households can receive up to \$1,200 per year. More importantly, this credit will be accessible to people who use an Individual Taxpayer Identification Number (ITIN), including undocumented workers and other taxpayers without a social security number.

With few barriers to receiving this credit, the WFTC is a uniquely effective tool for working individuals and their families. As listening sessions hosted by the implementing agency took place from 2021 to 2022, barriers and opportunities to safeguard accessibility were identified – lending itself to a more equitable program design.

While effectiveness and efficiency of delivery are yet to be fully determined, credits like this lead with equity and bring economic resiliency to the communities too often left behind.

We can make significant strides toward reducing poverty and hunger when families can stretch their household budgets further and not have to choose between essential needs.

Obviously, this economic climate isn't sustainable and is indicative of a broader problem. Particularly in Washington State, where our tax code ranks as one of the most regressive in the country<sup>5</sup>. This tax structure actively inflames the economic woes of families struggling to get by and make ends meet, while the wealthiest in our state don't pay their fair share. While it should be noted that strides are being undertaken by the Washington State legislature to begin to correct this, continued and broader systems-level change isn't just advisable, it must be undertaken to cement the generational change necessary for addressing decades of disenfranchising and disempowering taxation and revenue policy.

ECONOMIC DATA  
AT A GLANCE  
Stevens County

All people in poverty (2020): 15.0%

Children in poverty: 20.4%

Median household income: \$50,958

Median rent: \$743

2021 Unemployment rate: 6.7%

## Public Benefits ■

Public Benefits are a lifeline out of poverty. By offering some flexibility and additional purchasing power for a household or individual, they can help rebuild or establish a pathway to economic security and stability while also ensuring that most basic needs are being met.

These benefits, particularly the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, previously known as Food Stamps, or Basic Food in Washington State) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), were two of the most mentioned benefits that listening session participants cited as critical to their budget.

These lifelines proved especially crucial during the pandemic when Emergency Allotments and expanded programmatic reach, such as Pandemic EBT, or P-EBT, for example, is a program that provides food benefits to children who had limited onsite meals at their school or childcare center due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Right here in Washington state, the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) introduced additional funding for individuals receiving food assistance because of COVID-19. This emergency funding began on April 4, 2020, covering benefits for March and April and has been extended on a monthly basis with federal approval. The allotment given to recipients is either the difference between their regular monthly benefit and the maximum benefit for their household size, or \$95, whichever is greater (or higher).

However, this supplemental funding is slated to be sunsetted by early 2023.

Among WAFOOD households,  
**37% RELIED ON FOOD ASSISTANCE**  
during the pandemic,  
up from the pre-COVID-19 usage of 30%.

Even before the pandemic, SNAP/Basic Food lifted 183,000 people above the poverty line in Washington, including 81,000 children, per year between 2013 and 2017, on average. That's roughly 500 people, per day, in Washington alone lifted out of poverty by SNAP<sup>6</sup>.

However, just because folks have been lifted out of poverty and begin to establish economic stability, doesn't mean that SNAP goes far enough or satisfies the most basic of basic needs. In fact, even in steady economic conditions, individuals and families that rely on SNAP know that much like the rest of their budget, stretching every SNAP dollar is paramount to enduring.

### SNAP BENEFITS FY '22

For each  
household  
member  
per month: **\$164**

For each  
household  
member  
per day: **\$5.40<sup>7</sup>**

So, let's explore how we can firmly anchor public benefits, such as SNAP and WIC, in the reality of surviving day-to-day on a benefit that also creates as much stigma as it does security for families in need.

This report would be remiss to not lead this section with the second highest overall priority for people with lived experience of poverty: barriers to accessing hot, nutritious meals by way of SNAP. In most cases, folks with flexible or disposable income have the autonomy to choose the food that best suits their needs in the moment. For example, a mom of two can swing by her local grocer and grab a hot, pre-prepared snack or meal for her kids and move on to her next task. Whereas a mom on SNAP must limit her choices to what works best for her family AND is allowed to be purchased with SNAP dollars. This isn't just an arbitrary barrier created with the best intent in mind. In fact, this is an insurmountable barrier that actively causes harm.

This isn't just a hypothetical scenario, this one that we heard repeatedly across the state at each one of our listening sessions. From Clark County to Whatcom County, we heard that not only are benefits being stretched thin (more on that later in this section), but they also don't cover the realistic everyday necessities of being a SNAP shopper. While the USDA Restaurant Meals Program does provide for certain exceptions, it has yet to be implemented in Washington State.

But how do we tackle this barrier? What can actually be done? It starts with reinforcing the purchasing power of SNAP through federal and state policy levers. As noted in the economic security & stability section, when families stretch to make ends meet, their struggles are amplified.

Not only does this create a burden for families to have to wait on edge to find out if they'll be able to feed themselves and/or their family, but it creates significant disparity in service for non-English speakers.

“

*When we first came here and got on food stamps, we didn't have enough food to get by. I didn't have enough money for my kids to eat even one full, healthy meal on food stamps. During the day we would eat a lot of ketchup packets from restaurants to make sure we had enough money for dinner. I would watch other kids barely touch their chicken nuggets while I kept my kids playing and I tried to keep them busy, try to keep them cheerful and not worry about money. But these food stamps, they just don't go far enough.*

– SHAWNA, WHATCOM COUNTY

“

*I was trying to go and do a review, and I sat on the phone for hundreds of minutes. And they have an automated system that's supposed to call you back but then at the end after you type in your information, your name, and your phone, give them your phone number for the call back, it says that somebody will get back to you within 48 hours, right? Then you wait 48 hours for them to call and nobody ever calls back. So, it feels like sometimes they trick you to get off the phone. But I waited so long that day, I thought 'okay let me do this automated system'. So, I ended up calling back again and waiting for another hour and a half to talk to somebody and then they hung up on me. So, sometimes the people working the lines are rude. If they had a bad call before and then you get on the phone, they'll hang up on you regardless of how long you've been sitting on the phone waiting. I feel like it's inconvenient to have to call back and sit on the phone for another hour, hour and a half, maybe two to speak to somebody for three minutes, four minutes."*

– DANTE, KING COUNTY

Among the 914 WAFOOD respondents who reported using SNAP during COVID-19, **MOST (81%) RESPONDENTS ON SNAP** reported that they fully use their monthly benefits.

Unfortunately, the purchasing power of SNAP and WIC isn't the only hurdle that many people with low-incomes face. A significant barrier we heard in a substantial number of listening sessions was just getting in the door in the first place.

For example, in our Tukwila listening session, we were told of numerous instances where non-English speakers would often be promised a "raincheck" or call back to speak with someone in their native language, often Spanish indigenous dialects, but the call never comes.

Another barrier posed by the existing administrative system is the dreaded wait time. Callbacks are, in theory, an answer to the problem of protracted wait times but the lived experience of our listening sessions participants spoke to the contrary. In fact, wait times of several hours were not uncommon and the efficiency of multiple check-ins per year elicited vigorous disapproval from participants.

ECONOMIC DATA  
AT A GLANCE  
**Whatcom County**

**All people in poverty (2020): 11.7%**  
**Children in poverty: 13.4%**  
**Median household income: \$70,463**

**Median rent: \$1,219**  
**2021 Unemployment rate: 6.0%**



## ECONOMIC DATA AT A GLANCE

### King County

**All people in poverty (2020): 7.6%**  
**Children in poverty: 8.0%**  
**Median household income: \$102,620**  
**Median rent: \$1,801**  
**2021 Unemployment rate: 6.0%**

With these barriers in mind, we can begin to determine an appropriate level of responsiveness that our state and federal policymakers should strive to meet. This idea, and the section as a whole, will be discussed in further detail in our conclusions, but it should be stressed here: these barriers can be addressed by wholistically remedying our administrative approach to how we treat people who are accessing public benefits.

## Housing ■

One cannot face the harsh economic realities that many Washingtonians face without accounting for one of the most basic needs: housing. It isn't a secret that housing, and the associated costs, have climbed sharply over the course of the past decade. We heard the tremendous impact of this housing market and the pain of dealing with little relief in place for families already struggling to put food on the table.

In every one of our listening sessions, we heard the emotional and economic toll that housing insecurity took on individuals and families. The fact of the matter is that without housing, other needs simply cannot be met. Therefore, housing costs and market pressure are ranked first in priority by people with lived experience of poverty. Truly solving Washington's housing crisis should be centered in the lived experiences of the very people experiencing the worst of the crisis. As you read more of this section, you'll find these experiences, while each moving and invaluable insightful, are not isolated stories.

Each day we allow this crisis to carry on, another experience of housing instability is thrust upon another person, another family in our own community.

Not only does the lack of affordability and availability hamstring families struggling to put a roof over their heads, but the lack of ownership opportunities undercuts any hope for folks to build wealth in the same or similar way many of the wealthiest in our state have.

While uniformity across the state has been a critical feature in every section of this report when it comes to housing it can't be stressed enough that every region has its own unique needs. What may be true in Clark County in terms of housing supply or another variable in the housing market might not be true for Mason County, or any other county. All of this is to stress that policymakers, at the local, state, and federal levels have a responsibility to address the needs of their respective communities and the needs of the broader market.

“

*Over here in Colleville, it's extremely difficult to find any kind of housing. And, when you do find it, it's cost prohibitive to the point that many people have to roommate with sometimes other couples or entire families just so they can afford a place. I have a friend who has a studio apartment that she's getting \$1,200 a month for, and she lives 25 miles out of town. And I'm just in awe that anybody could afford that.*

— BREE, STEVENS COUNTY

As we embark on building a more equitable community, we must start from the bottom up. This means addressing the needs that are most necessary to survival first: housing and food. One can't come without the other. Public policy decisions can change lives for the better if it's proactive and flexible; unfortunately, housing investments and relief targeted to best serve low- & moderate-income folks has not met either of those benchmarks. If someone is living at or below the poverty line, there's a statistically significant chance they have experienced some form of housing insecurity.

In short: homelessness and housing insecurity, just like food insecurity, is a policy choice.

One policy choice that resonated as a topline item, repeated from listening session to listening session, is the necessity to tackle drastic, untenable rent increases and fees. While rent control in Washington is currently prohibited under statute<sup>8</sup>, other measures to ensure a stable housing market that meets every person's needs. These measures include addressing predatory fees, unreasonable rent increases, and providing a reasonable timeline for rent increases. Additionally, but not unsubstantially, to these measures (which are further expanded upon in the conclusions section), robust and sustained investments over the next decade(s) in a range of housing options are a solid foundation for government entities to build upon.

Of course, not every piece of the market desperately needs a complete facelift. In fact, one segment of the housing market that works well and is valued by folks with lived experience is housing subsidies, such as Housing Choice Voucher Program (Section 8). By utilizing housing choice vouchers (the nation's largest source of rental assistance), administered locally by public housing agencies, a family of four can worry less about stretching their paycheck to cover rent and other basic needs, such as food. While this program works well, there were barriers to accessing this program that were flagged by our listening session participants – primarily that not enough landlords accept or work with Section 8 recipients. In our conclusions section, we'll explore strategies both the state and federal government can employ to mitigate these barriers.



## Right to Food ■

As we have illustrated in this report, public policy, at its best, works to correct longstanding racial and economic disparities. A human rights approach to food security centers the lived experiences and needs of people experiencing hunger and food insecurity. We need public policy that works to address the root causes of hunger and food insecurity. For Northwest Harvest, this means establishing the right to food.

The right to food is the idea that people should be able to access adequate food to live up to their fullest potential.

The right to food is achieved when everyone can grow, produce, buy, or acquire the food they want to consume for themselves and their families.

This means that pursuing the right to food by way of creating policies that center human dignity and remove barriers to accessing adequate food.

The Right to Food is a longstanding international human rights concept, emerging in the 1948 Universal Declaration on Human Rights and again in the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). Under the right to food, food is defined by three core elements: accessibility, availability, and adequacy. As we explore each element, bear in mind that these examples are representative of just one of many possible outcomes and we encourage policymakers to think beyond these examples.

### AVAILABILITY:

Food is directly sourced from the land and natural resources or obtained by a well-functioning system of market and distribution.

- Strengthen the We Feed Washington program: secure state and federal funding to provide locally grown, nutritious food, ensuring food for communities experiencing deep hunger that is less susceptible to national supply chain disruptions

### ACCESSIBILITY:

Food is both physically and economically obtainable, ensuring that people do not go hungry at the expense of other basic needs.

- Expand access to fruits and vegetables with an ongoing investment of \$6 million in the Fruit & Vegetable Incentives Program
- Ensure physical accessibility by expanding access to dental therapists & funding the Immigrant Workers Health Fund
- Promote economic accessibility by establishing a statewide pilot Guaranteed Basic Income, increasing the Working Families Tax Credit, and improving access to TANF and adequacy of TANF cash assistance

### ADEQUACY:

Food is safe for consumption, culturally-responsive, and nutritious at all developmental stages of life.

- Eliminate barriers to child nutrition by providing healthy school meals at no cost to all Washington students
- Implementing "Hunger-Free Campuses," a comprehensive approach to providing low-income college students with resources to access nutritious food and meals

While the Right to Food outlines conditions of our food system, the Right to Food is so much more than just alleviating lack of food and malnutrition – it’s an understanding that hunger and food insecurity are tied to racial injustice, lack of safe and affordable housing, climate change and more. In order to address hunger and food insecurity, we must work toward environmental protections, workers’ rights, food sovereignty for Native communities, the sustainability and resiliency of our natural resources, and self-determination for all people. The Right to Food demands accountability from our government to ensure that all people can feed themselves with dignity.

But, again, these examples pale in comparison to the real, tangible impact of what could be accomplished. If we can ensure folks are able to feed themselves with dignity, we can lift one of the most harmful weights of poverty. A weight our listening session participants know all too well.

“

*Accessing food without a car or a nearby store is extremely difficult. Last summer, I had a two door, no-AC car. I had to make sure I was doing grocery shopping at dawn, or I couldn't take my kid anywhere, not in the middle of the heat of the day. Plus, the roads aren't safe enough for me to bike with my kid. I can't just walk and overheat my child, risk the items I just bought by not being able to keep them cold.*

*It isn't safe. What I'm getting at is that your needs, and your kid's needs, all take a toll on you -- and it's just made worse by barriers we can't fully control.*

– MOREL, CLARK COUNTY

This is not a moralistic argument, it's pragmatic to understand that a human-rights-based approach to ending hunger and addressing poverty is the strongest possible response from our state government. The impetus for this right grows every day that another person becomes food insecure.

ECONOMIC DATA  
AT A GLANCE

Clark County

**All people in poverty (2020): 8.7%**

**Children in poverty: 10%**

**Median household income: \$76,929**

**Median rent: \$1,432**

**2021 Unemployment rate: 5.5%**



As stated in the introduction of this report, we believe firmly in the principle of policies ideas that uphold targeted universalism. How we achieve these policy goals and truly uphold the ideas of this. Again, with targeted approaches based on how disparate groups are situated socioeconomically, culturally, and across geographies, we can challenge the notion that poverty is an inescapable reality for families across the state.

### Economic Security & Stability Recommendations ■

Far too many families in our state struggle with poverty, in no small part because they lack the economic security and stability other families enjoy. As we explore the work to be done, these are just a small sample of what can be undertaken by policymakers.

Economic empowerment begins and ends with justice: both by working to right the wrongs of both systemic economic oppressions and by flipping our upside-down tax structure right-side up.

- Undertake the work of revising our upside-down tax code, which impacts everyone who is not among the wealthiest in our state. This includes passing various remedies, including a wealth tax, estate tax reform, and identifying other approaches of raising revenue without actively harming low- & moderate-income families.
- Empower people in our state with direct-cash benefits by investing in and expanding programs such as the Working Families Tax Credit & Guaranteed Basic Income. This includes ensuring a robust and accessible program through consistent, equitable expansion.
- Continue listening sessions hosted by the appropriate implementing agency, with a focus on multi-language options to continue our state's growing focus on approaching policy with an equity lens.

### Public Benefits Recommendations ■

Public benefits are often the lifeline out of poverty for folks across Washington. By investing in and expanding public benefits, we can show that this state is serious about tackling not only the harmful anti-black, racist, and classist stereotypes associated with public benefits but is earnestly invested in the well-being of those who need support.

- Ensure long-term economic security & stability by investing in, not stripping down, core nutrition assistance programs at the federal (SNAP) & state (Fruit & Vegetables Incentive Program, Basic Food Education & Training). This includes increasing benefit levels.
- Reduce barriers to programs by expanding eligibility for individuals and families, including postsecondary students, immigrants, and able-bodied adults without dependents.
- At the federal level, we must lift the ban on the purchase of hot meals for SNAP participants. As it stands, purchasing hot prepared meals is currently barred by USDA under [cite reg]. By easing these rules and regulations we could proactively ensure that families who need access to food that suits their needs have a bevy of options.
- As noted above, policymakers have the ability and the imperative to build on existing good policy, including raising or removing shelter deduction cap on SNAP participants to truly reflect the housing market.
- In order to improve the overall experience of benefits recipients, reducing the call wait times for people trying to access their public benefits was a key point for listening session participants. DSHS must improve their responsiveness to these concerns.

## Housing Recommendations ■

Housing insecurity is a life-altering economic condition that can paralyze a person and their family's economic mobility and overall wellbeing. While there is a long way to go, Northwest Harvest will continue to advocate in Olympia for both the funding and leveraging of policy to prevent homelessness, offer robust cash assistance, and have accessible rental assistance for those who truly need it.

- Affordability was the first and foremost priority for our listening session participants. This means supporting middle housing, barring or pairing down single-family homes, and investing in housing at a rate that is just as unprecedented as the housing crisis.
- At the state level, continue to invest in the Housing Trust Fund to secure affordable housing options for people at every income level.
- In order to ensure everyone has a safe, reliable home in this state we first must ensure that tenants are protected equally. This means leveraging the residential landlord-tenant act in an impactful manner<sup>1</sup>.

## Right to Food Recommendations ■

A right to food would build legal standing and viability among institutions around food. These examples are just a few of what could be achieved in the near future.

- To ensure accessibility, legislators can encourage the uptake of direct cash benefits that empower individuals to be able to obtain food without economic barriers. We can also promote physical accessibility to food by expanding access to dental therapists (you can't eat as easily if your teeth are in poor health) & invest in the Immigrant Workers Health Fund.
- We must uphold adequacy by supporting culturally responsive and nutritious food at all developmental stages. This means eliminating barriers for K-12 s making school meals genuinely cost-free. This could also be the very basis for creating a statewide strategy to encourage safe and nutritious food that meets individual dietary needs.
- Availability can be achieved by reforming agricultural policies to support more sustainable and decentralized food systems and subsidize the production of nutritious foods.

## Annotated References

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**Northwest Harvest strongly encourages readers of this report to act by speaking out against policies that contribute to cycles of poverty and hunger. Contact your elected officials and tell them how these issues affect all of us and the health of our communities. Make your opinions known, and ensure your voice is heard. Together, we can build a movement and an amplified call for systemic change.**

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