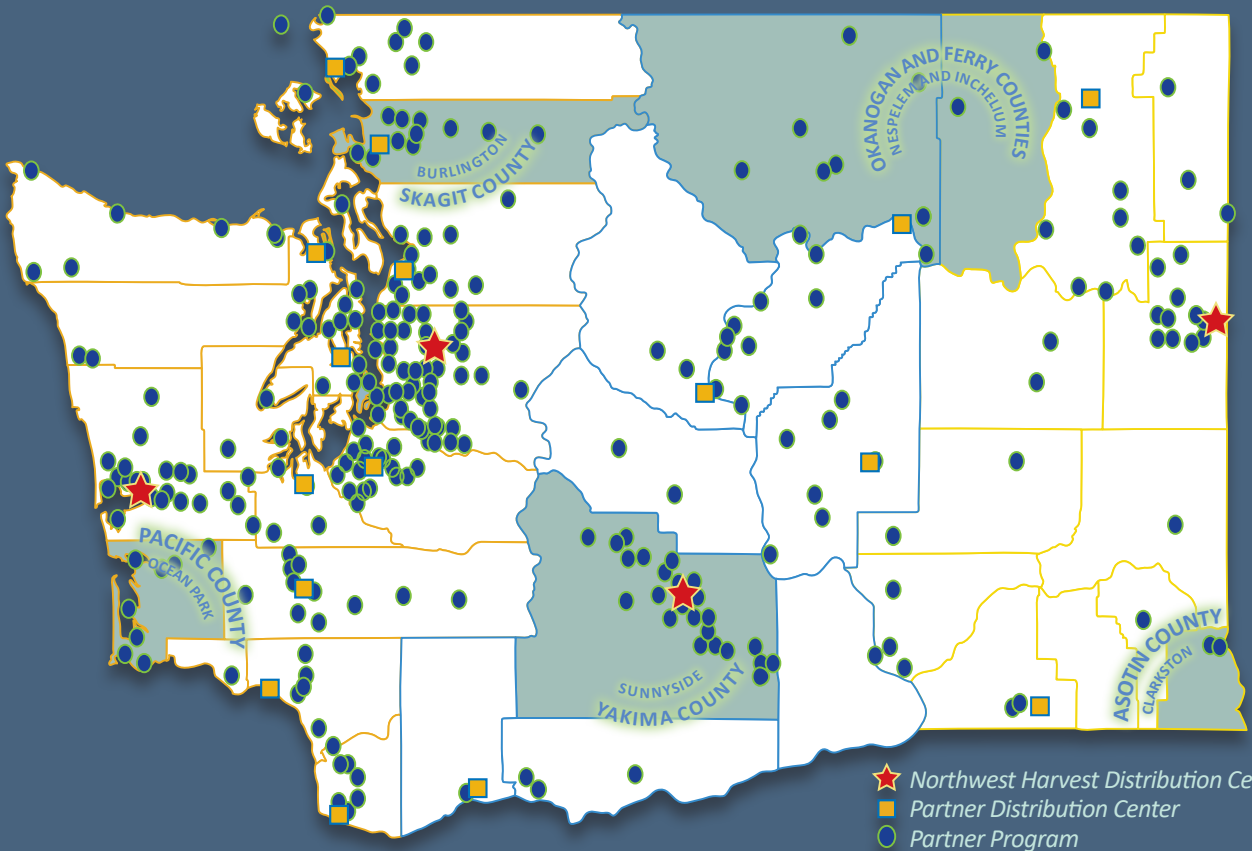


Focus on Food Security: Bringing Food Justice to Washington

Northwest Harvest's Focus Group Report 2018

FEEDING OUR NEIGHBORS IN NEED STATEWIDE THROUGH A NETWORK OF 375
 FOOD BANKS, MEAL PROGRAMS AND HIGH-NEED SCHOOLS.



NORTHWEST HARVEST

Northwest Harvest is Washington's own statewide hunger relief agency. Our mission is leading the fight for hungry people statewide to have access to nutritious food while respecting their dignity and promoting good health. Our vision is ending hunger in Washington.

Last fiscal year we distributed 32 million pounds of food to a network of 375 food banks, meal programs and high-need schools across the state.

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Focus on Food Security 2018: Bringing Food Justice to Washington

Northwest Harvest is pleased to publish the 11th edition of our *Focus on Food Security* report. This annual report details struggles with hunger and stories of resilience from food pantry participants in their own words. This report also identifies the policy solutions that can help us achieve a healthier and hunger-free Washington.

Each year, we travel the state, visiting with participants from five food pantries in our statewide network of 375 partner organizations. We ask questions to identify barriers to food access and basic needs services. Their real-life experiences inform our public policy agenda, giving us the critical eye needed to adjust laws and policies and strengthen public investments in order to attain our vision of ending hunger in Washington.

This year, we visited programs in Ocean Park, Clarkston, Burlington, and Sunnyside. Additionally, we conducted two focus groups on the reservation for the Colville Confederated Tribes: one in Nespelem and one in Inchelium.

Northwest Harvest thanks the following programs, their staff, and volunteers for their assistance with our focus groups: Joanne Huntley, Asotin County Food Bank; Dorothy Palmer, Colville Confederated Tribes Food Bank; Rebecca Schlaht, Helping Hands Food Bank; Michael Goldberg, Ocean Park Food Bank; and Ken Trainor, Sunrise Outreach Center Sunnyside Food Bank.

We also thank the Burlington Library, Pacific County Fire District #1, and the First Baptist Church in Sunnyside for the use of their facility meeting spaces.

Finally, we extend a heartfelt thank you to our focus group participants. Your words have power, and we are honored that you have entrusted us to convey them here. Your contribution is the most essential part of the effort to make Washington an even better place for all of us to call home.

THOMAS REYNOLDS,
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER



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Access previous years' reports at:

northwestharvest.org/Focus-on-Food-Security

INTRODUCTION



In *Focus on Food Security 2018*, we feature stories collected on the Colville Confederated Tribes Reservation and in Asotin, Pacific, Skagit, and Yakima Counties. In total, 77 participants opened up their hearts and their lives to tell us about their struggles with hunger and poverty.

Every summer we travel the state to collect these stories. The work is both rewarding and sobering, taking in the details of real-life stories from people who have worked their whole lives or encountered some bad luck and are now struggling to get by after a harsh economic setback.

“My situation is money in, money out,” said Judith, a retiree who served our country in the Navy. “I get my check on the third: the rent’s paid, the bills are paid—I have very few bills—then I live off of what I have left.”

What Judith has left is not much, and from that, she scrimps and saves to put away even just a little bit of money in case of an emergency. “I do without a lot. I set aside for an emergency, but anything over \$100, I’m screwed. It takes a lot of doing without to do that.”

Judith is not alone in her struggles. Hunger continues to persist in households all across our state:

- Nearly 1 in 8 Washingtonians struggles against hunger. ¹
- 1 in 5 Washington children don’t know where their next meal will come from. ²
- Hunger disproportionately affects African American, Latinx, and single female headed households. ¹
- Hunger occurs at significantly higher rates in rural communities. ¹

Behind every statistic, there is a real person struggling to get by. These are seniors, children, people with disabilities, veterans, and low-wage workers. These are people who have worked, who would work if they were able, or who are actively working to build a better life for themselves. What’s keeping them whole is a fragile and complicated constellation of services and programs that helps defray costs for food, health care, housing, or other essential needs.

If a single thread of the safety net is harmed, then the whole

thing can unravel, and our focus group participants are fully aware that threats to these programs could become a reality. When we conducted our focus groups, Congress was engaged in debates to repeal the Affordable Care Act and passing budget resolutions that threatened to cut billions from food assistance and other safety net programs. The emotional toll on our participants was palpable: tears of anguish were shed and we, despite 11 years of conducting these focus groups, were caught off guard, searching to find words of comfort.

And here is the comfort that we could offer: we will help you tell your stories. We will ask your lawmakers to hear and understand your experiences. We will work side by side with you to protect and strengthen the programs that help you and your families. You are not alone. We are in this fight together.

ASOTIN COUNTY



Population³: Clarkston—7,341;
Asotin County—22,306

Clarkston

The towns of Clarkston, Washington and Lewiston, Idaho, named for Pacific Northwest explorers, Lewis and Clark, sit opposite one another on the banks of the Snake River, and their proximity makes for a constellation of social services that are used by struggling residents of both towns. This support system is essential to keeping struggling families together.

Michele grew up in Clarkston and is now raising her own family here. She and her fiancé have two children together, including the sleeping baby that she cradled throughout our focus group. “We had gotten food stamps at one point,” she said, “but we’re trying to be self-dependent, self-supporting, and I think now my fiancé makes too much now.”

Michele and her fiancé made the decision together that she should

be a stay at home mom when their first child was born. Now that their child is school aged, Michele was preparing to return to work when she discovered she was pregnant with a second child. One salary is not quite enough to meet the basic needs for their family of four. She stated, “We’re at that place where—okay—you make too much money (for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or SNAP), but I still use the food bank.”

With help from the food bank, Michele and her fiancé can stretch his income to cover other needs, including buying a house when it turned out to be a more affordable option than renting. Michele likes the food bank: “The essentials are super helpful,” she said. “The food is great, but the cakes—I don’t know if I should tell them not to put it in my box. They get desserts free and people are just trying to give them away.” Other participants agreed that although they are grateful for the food, they prefer healthier foods instead of the large amount of sweets and desserts that are always included in a food bank box.

Participants also wondered whether the food bank could tailor their food boxes to accommodate family sizes better. Hazel worked for 30 years as a nurse until she could no longer work due to a disability. She and her household of nine family members, including her husband, children and grandchildren, receive just \$49 in SNAP assistance. Yet she receives the exact same box of food from the food bank as Michele and others receive. That box, provided by the Asotin County Food Bank, is available every two months, alternated with a small box of commodities available on an emergency basis every 30 days.

The dramatic cut in Hazel's SNAP is connected to an overpayment issue. “In January, my husband had a job, but welfare didn’t process my information like they’re supposed to, so we had an overpayment for \$4000,” Hazel explained. She had reported her husband’s income as required but did not realize that there was an overpayment error, because she did not get a clear explanation of how her household’s benefits are calculated. Nonetheless, the cost of paying back the overpayment is costing her in other essential needs. She said, “They take 10% of your food stamps to pay that back, or you can pay back the \$4000 in cash. They told me to see it as a loan with no interest. I could have used that loan to get my teeth fixed, get dentures, and not lose my pick-up truck to pay for food!”

“This food bank is not that big. Our community is very low income. Everyone is relying on this food bank. It won’t be self-sufficient to provide for everyone without food stamps.”

—Jessica

Jessica is a divorced mom of three boys and is a full-time student when her kids are in school, taking classes to find higher paying work. She also has concerns with how her household’s SNAP benefits are calculated. “I’m solely dependent on my son’s Social Security and their dad’s child support,” she said. “When child support goes down, they don’t adjust it, but when it goes up—” she snapped her fingers, implying that her benefits disappear in a flash.



Punkie

“After payday, it just goes downhill. Two weeks before payday, I’m opening the cupboard thinking, ‘What? Did mice eat my food?’”

An increase in child support combined with the loss of SNAP benefits creates a net loss of support, and as a result, needs go unmet. “I’m talking about \$500 in child support,” stated Jessica. “It’s just going to tilter: the house has ants in it; it takes all the money for your food. I’m totally up in arms about it.”

A significant part of Jessica’s monthly expenses is medications for her sons’ disabilities. “One of my sons doesn’t get medical because of insurance through his dad,” she said. “Private insurance picks up 80%, so the state pays nothing.” Jessica’s son is ineligible for the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP) because he is on his father’s insurance plan, but Jessica must cover the costs for his medications that his insurance does not cover, and it is essential that his medications are provided. When asked what might happen if they did not have health insurance, Jessica said, “I’d die—I have asthma. My kids—the stigma they face when they’re not on medicine—my oldest would probably become suicidal again.”

Safety net services are essential, a lifeline for Jessica and other struggling families, but Jessica is not asking for a hand out. “The government should fund people on welfare to get an education so they can get a better job to support themselves,” she said. “I want to get above the system, not sitting here all the time. None of us deserve that.”

Brianna has lived in Clarkston for 20 years. She and her twin half-siblings were raised by a single mom. She grew up in low-income housing and eventually, a house provided with assistance from Section 8.

But because Section 8 has complicated restrictions for people with prior felony convictions, her family could not live together under one roof. “My mom had that with the twins’ dad—he’s a felon,” she said. “She was trying to find a place for all of us. He had to live in his car so the rest of us didn’t have to.”

Now Brianna is a mom herself, raising a daughter with developmental disabilities. “The only time my daughter ever weighed the right amount was when she was 12 weeks in utero,” she said. To help her daughter’s weight gain, Brianna relies on help from the Women Infant and Children’s program, or WIC, and overall, her experiences have been overwhelmingly positive. “They were always supportive through that whole thing; they helped us right along,” she said, describing her appointments with WIC nutritionists. “They gave us plenty of baby food to try. I



Brianna

told them she’s had problems gaining weight, so they gave us extra baby food during her solids years. It’s been working out fine. Every step they’ve worked with us on her feeding problems.”

Brianna also relies on health insurance provided by the state which is essential for covering her daughter’s medications. “With her seizure and GI medicine, it runs over \$1500-\$2000/month, and I don’t pay nothing,” she described.

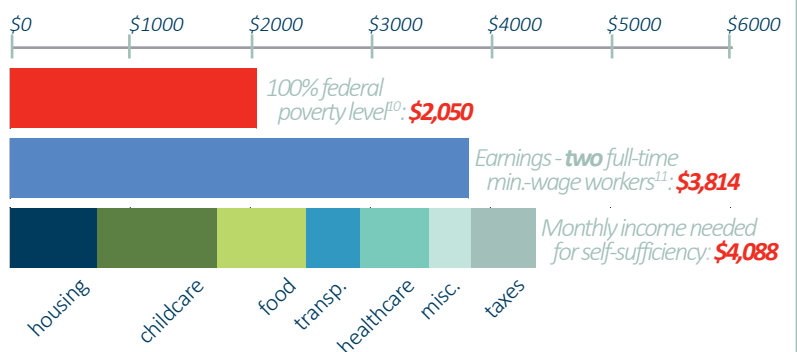
Efforts to cut Medicaid or Medicare pose a serious threat to kids like Brianna’s daughter who have a pre-existing condition from birth. She will need assistance from insurance for her entire life, because as Brianna observed, “I’m not sure how long she would last without medicine.”

ASOTIN COUNTY:

Unemployment (Sept. 2017) ⁴	3.6%
Social Security recipients (2016) ⁵	3.4% (755)
Schoolchildren eligible for subsidized meals (Oct. 2015) ⁶	
Asotin County	56.6% (2,572)
WIC recipients (2016) ⁷	3.8% (853)
Total served (2016)⁸:	
▪ Basic Food (SNAP)	4,283
▪ Medical assistance	6,801
▪ TANF cash assistance	393
▪ ABD program clients	66

Monthly income needed for self-sufficiency⁹: **\$4,088**

Bottom bar of graph shows income for a family of four to meet basic needs in Asotin County.



PACIFIC COUNTY



Population³: Ocean Park—5,831;
Pacific County—21,249

Ocean Park

What started out as a religious revival community is now the coastal town of Ocean Park. Home to 28 miles of sandy beaches, Ocean Park has a thriving tourist industry, but the tourism trade does not mean prosperity for all local residents.

For many, the cost of living is unaffordable. Terry moved back to Ocean Shores several years ago, seeking the comfort and familiarity of his hometown after receiving a diagnosis of a chronic illness. “The stores have tourist prices,” he said. “In the winter, the prices drop a little. We’re paying tourist prices to live in a local community.”

Locals may live here year-round, but that does not mean they can find steady, full-time employment. “All local businesses reduce their hours as the tourists go away,” explained Debbie who cannot



Elaine

work due to a disability. “They don’t have half the restaurants or any place you can go to wash dishes for a living or waitress or any of that kind of thing.”

What few steady employment opportunities that do exist are hard to find. “There’s no opportunities here for anyone really,” began Judith, a Navy veteran. “Those people who have lived here most of their lives have secured positions in the area and will stay in those positions for the rest of their lives.”

The tight job market means that the town is losing a valuable resource: educated young people. “Our high school kids cannot get a job for love or money in this town,” stated Debbie. “They can’t wait to get out of town. They don’t see any life for them going on down the road.”

The tight labor market also means that those who manage to have steady work may have little power to speak up for themselves if treated poorly. Arthur and his wife Kris had good paying jobs at a restaurant, but left because they weren’t getting paid for all the hours that they worked. “They’re open from 11 a.m. to 11 p.m., and wanted us to constantly work,” explained Arthur. “We didn’t get paid! From 11:00 to 4:00, I got paid, but the other 7 hours, we’d work for free.” After a long job search, Kris finally found part-time work cleaning houses, but it’s a steep paycut: their income went from \$1600 monthly paychecks to just \$260 every two weeks.

Kris and Arthur are able to supplement their meager income with SNAP, but their benefits are not adequate enough to cover their most basic nutrition needs. “I plan only on dinners,” stated Arthur. “If you plan three meals like most people do, you’re

not going to make a week.”

“By the time I pay rent and insurance, I run out of money,” added Jeanette, a retired counselor whose Social Security income yields her just \$38 each month in SNAP. “It’s enough for flour, sugar to supplement the eggs, butter—things I get from the food bank.”

“I would tell Congress to look at these faces that are living on \$16 or \$30 in food stamps, not \$20 billion. I can’t wrap my head around that figure, just like they can’t wrap their heads around \$16 in food stamps—they need to see what \$16 of food stamps buys and puts on our table and what we’re expected to eat.”

—Debbie

SNAP benefits are also inadequate for health-restricted diets. Shelley has lived in Ocean Park for 20 years. She said, “I’m diabetic and on a fixed diet. Food stamps are not enough to pay for those kinds of diets.”

SNAP benefits may be meager, but they are a lifeline for hungry people. Tommy works at a local laundromat, and when asked how he would compensate if his SNAP benefits were cut or eliminated, he said he would depend on the three food banks that serve this general area. Kevin, who grew up in a family of 8, replied, “They’re not open on a daily basis, so you’d starve in between.” Arthur added, “If they take your food stamps, you’re done unless you hit every single place or overwhelm food banks more than

“My heart goes out to everyone here, and I hope there’s some way to figure out a way to help everyone. People can go to the food bank two or three times if you say you’re out of food, but they’re still not going to get everything they need.”

once a week or once a month. It's too damn expensive here."

"We're struggling down here!" exclaimed Laborta, whose combined Social Security Income (SSI) with that of her husband's put them over the limit for SNAP despite his high medical costs for his emphysema. She added, "This is a really poor community. When it rains, it pours. We're on the verge of possibly losing our home."

The purchasing of vacation homes has made for a divided housing market. Housing costs might be mitigated with assistance but, "Section 8 is not available here," said Jennifer, who has lived here most of her life. "The waitlist is 10 years."

Lavonne moved to Ocean Park last year after retiring. She added, "There's an apartment complex in Ilwaco. You pay 30% of income, but if you have any assets worth money, you're not getting in." Instead of spending down retirement savings to live in more affordable housing, Lavonne almost was homeless, until her ex-husband helped her buy a modest house.

For many in our focus group, an RV was the only affordable option. "You have to be really selective about an RV park," said Judith. "I live down here on R Street. It's cleaned up, no drugs there, but you have to look at it and decide, do I want to live here? Will I be safe here?"

This group was unanimous in their plea that lawmakers

"Before I retired, I was self-employed," said Jeanette. "I couldn't afford health insurance after my divorce. I was uninsured for 15 years."

While uninsured, Jeanette would go to urgent care clinics whenever she got sick. "I'd always find that because I was uninsured, the treatment I received was poor."

As an example, Jeanette described how it took her three appointments to finally get a diagnosis and treatment for walking pneumonia. "The first one, I went in, but because I smoked, they decided I had bronchitis. They gave me puffers, then sent me away." When her symptoms got worse, Jeanette returned for a second time.

"They took my blood pressure, and I made a mistake and told them that's high for me." At that visit, she walked away with a diagnosis of high blood pressure, but her underlying reason for her visit was ignored.

When she returned for a third visit with the same complaint, a physician's assistant ordered a chest x-ray to confirm her suspicions that she had pneumonia. "I told them I have



Jeanette

no insurance—how much? They said \$300. I said I'm not going for an x-ray. I need antibiotics for walking pneumonia, and I need it now. The PA consulted the doctor who said it was ok to write a prescription. I got it and felt better than (I had in the previous) two months."

Now that Jeanette has insurance, it's a different story. "When I got old enough to qualify for Medicare, I go in and everyone treats me like a queen," she said. "When they take away the insurance, it's all going to happen over and over again—the self-diagnosing, the not being listened to—because that's what they do. When you have no money, in this society, you don't get help. If you have money, you get help."

understand their reality before making any cuts to basic needs services. "Go out and live in the community!" exclaimed Arthur.

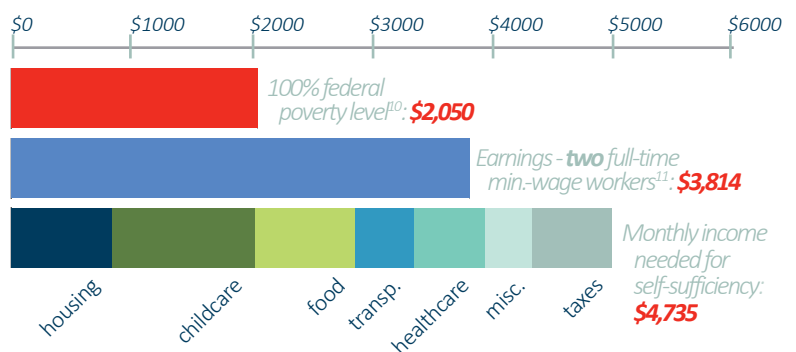
"Get out, be active, communicate, find out as much as you can. Be with people—they're humans! We're humans! See how we live."

PACIFIC COUNTY:

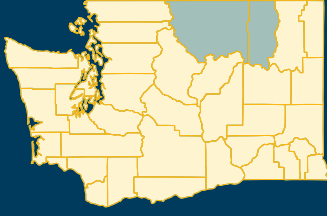
Unemployment (Sept. 2017) ⁴	6.0%
Social Security recipients (2016) ⁵	3.2% (674)
Schoolchildren eligible for subsidized meals (Oct. 2015) ⁶	
Pacific County	59.4% (1,038)
WIC recipients (2016) ⁷	3.9% (823)
Total served (Nov. 2016)⁸:	
Basic Food (SNAP)	4,220
Medical assistance	6,871
TANF cash assistance	286
ABD program clients	79

Monthly income needed for self-sufficiency⁹: **\$4,735**

Bottom bar of graph shows income for a family of four to meet basic needs in Pacific County.



FERRY AND OKANOGAN COUNTIES



Population³:

Ferry County—7,614;

Okanogan County—41,554

Nespelem and Inchelium

The Colville Indian Reservation spans across three counties in northeastern Washington. Measuring over 2.8 million acres, the reservation is home to members of 12 indigenous tribes that now make up the federally recognized Colville Confederated Tribes.

The seat of tribal government is in Nespelem, home to a large government building, a community center, and the Colville Confederated Tribes Food Bank, or as it is locally called, “food distribution.” The food bank distributes federal commodities provided through the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR), donated and purchased food, and vouchers for the Tribal Voucher program.

Federal law prohibits eligible individuals from combining

assistance from SNAP with FDPIR: a choice must be made between the two programs. Here in Nespelem, most of our focus group participants opted for FDPIR commodities. “We get commodities here. I depend on that,” said Yvonne, who has lived on the reservation for 57 years and uses her commodities to feed herself, her adult son and daughter, and her grandchildren.

Unlike food stamps, commodities don’t give the recipient a choice. If you choose commodities, you must take what is given to you, and that has its limitations. Cindi is on Social Security Disability, unable to work after having survived brain cancer. Her limited SSDI income puts her just \$30 over the income eligibility to receive SNAP, so she uses FDPIR commodities. “Going from food stamps to commodities meant that I went from buying what I like to having too much carbs,” she explained. Concerned for her health but on a commodities diet, Cindi cannot use her whole allotment. “I’m always conscious of diabetes. Now I have to find another house that can consume some commodities.”

The food bank is the only distributor of FDPIR commodities on the reservation. This means that for some reservation residents, the decision between SNAP and FDPIR may be made by the distance that they must travel to get to the food bank. In Inchelium, 51 miles to the west of Nespelem, most of our focus group participants opted for SNAP instead of driving the often dangerous, winding mountain pass road to get commodities.

But Inchelium’s residents aren’t shopping at the reservation store in town. They found the prices at the reservation store to be too high. “People go to this store to

get stuff they need—a little bit of salt or sugar, but you never see a full cart going up to that cash register,” said Mike, a father with an adult son and another high school junior at home.

Instead, Inchelium residents will make the 97-mile trip to Spokane to find larger chain retailers to stretch their limited SNAP benefits with bargain prices. “I have to have something else to do in Spokane,” said Joann, a mom and lifelong resident of the reservation. “It takes \$30-\$40 for gas to get there.”

Residents of both Inchelium and Nespelem frequently must go to a larger town like Spokane or Wenatchee for health care. All of our focus group participants have health insurance provided by Medicaid or Medicare and supplemented by the Indian Health Service (IHS). Local IHS clinics are used for primary care, but getting an appointment can be difficult due to a lack of providers. Rachel has two young children at home and recently started using food distribution after her fiancé started working at the food bank. “It’s more difficult to see an actual doctor,” she said. “A same-day appointment is all you can do. I’m going on four months going to see a nurse practitioner and not seeing a doctor. There’s no uniform contact, one on one.”

That means a lack of continuity of care which is further complicated by IHS requirements for a purchase order or referral for each visit, even if it is a follow-up appointment for the same health issue. Cindi described the headache of trying to get a root canal, having to get three different purchase orders for three different providers needed just to get the job done. “With the contract system, I have



Dottie

“I have medical needs I got to take care of. If my insurance went away, it would take me a long time to cut food, so I would probably just die. I’d have no money to take care of myself.”

to get a referral from here, a referral from Coulee Dam, then go to Wenatchee,” she said. “How do I do that when I have to call the contract lady at 7:30 a.m., wait for a call all day long, and then that appointment is missed. I couldn’t get a purchase order number to get care.”

Payment for health care is also a nightmare. Jeanne is a senior citizen and mother of three adult daughters. She explained that IHS is “the payee of last resort, so you need to have Medicare. They go to Medicare/Medicaid first, then pick over what is left of the bill.”

Despite its complications, this group highly values having health insurance and most asked that lawmakers prioritize protecting their access to affordable health care. Jake was a fire fighter until a knee injury put him out of commission and out of work. “You don’t notice health care until you get hurt, then the bills start coming in like that, and it hits you more than you think. Would you rather have health care or food? What kind of deal is that?”



In isolated Inchelium, the jobs market is bleak. “It sucks,” said Laurie, a life-long resident who supplements her diet with fishing, hunting, and picking berries. “You have to go to Nespelem or Omak.”

Nespelem is the seat of tribal government and is busy with the activity of people working government and social services jobs, but Inchelium, more than an hour’s drive away, is a completely different environment due to very limited services or businesses. “The grocery store,” offered Jake. “That’s the only place. A clinic maybe, but staff is pretty full there.”

Virgil, at the time of our focus group, was expecting his first child with his partner, Alyssa. Virgil had a job at a mill in Omak but “The mill ran out,” explained Alyssa.

The loss of earnings has made a significant difference for the couple’s diet. “When I was working at the mill, making money, I was eating steaks,” said Virgil. “Now I’m eating easy mac and Top Ramen.”

Alyssa gets SNAP for which she has been asked to complete 23 hours of job searching online, but there is no DSHS office in Inchelium. When she tried to meet this requirement in Colville, she was treated poorly by staff. “They got mad at her, because she’s in the wrong office,” explained Virgil, who added that they wanted her to go to Republic which is more than an hour’s drive away. Alyssa added, “But it was more convenient for us to go to a doctor in Colville, so I thought it would be a convenient place to go for DSHS.” Without a local infrastructure to support job searches and training, the couple will need to figure out how they can support their growing family despite the very limited work opportunities near home.

FERRY / OKANOGAN COUNTIES:

Unemployment (Sept. 2017)⁴
9.5% | 4.7%

Social Security recipients (2016)⁵
3.3% (254) | 3.1% (1,299)

Schoolchildren eligible for subsidized meals (Oct. 2015)⁶
Ferry/Okanogan Counties
81.1% (222) | 79.9% (149)

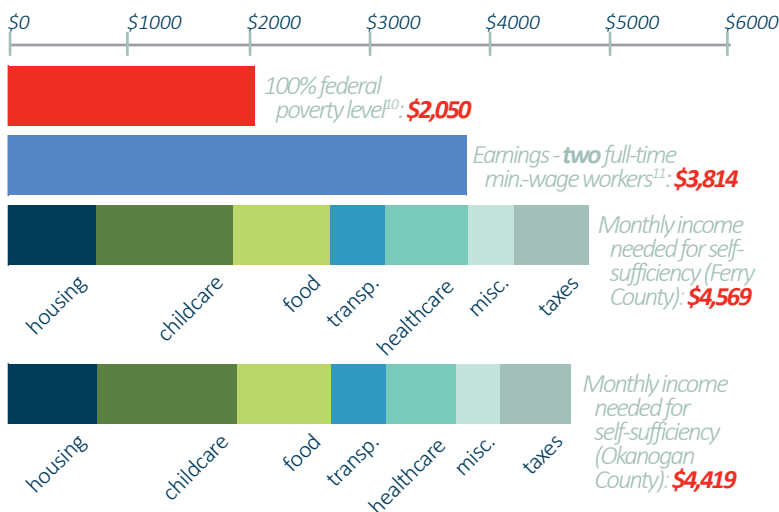
WIC recipients (2016)⁷
3.7% (282) | 8% (3,453)

Total served (Nov. 2016)⁸:

- Basic Food (SNAP) 1,427 | 8,671
- Medical assistance 2,432 | 16,563
- TANF cash assistance 76 | 302
- ABD program clients 17 | 107

Monthly income needed for self-sufficiency⁹: \$4,569 | \$4,419

Bottom bars of graph shows income for a family of four to meet basic needs in Ferry/Okanogan Counties.



SKAGIT COUNTY



Population³: Burlington—11,476;
Skagit County—123,681

Burlington

Skagit County is home to approximately 90,000 acres of farmland, producing over \$300 million of crops, livestock, and dairy products annually.¹² This local bounty makes its way to markets and farm stands, as well as local food banks.

“I expect bags of flour, canned goods,” said Rena, who works part-time and is raising two sons. “It’s really great to have fresh produce available to you. It’s a bonus—you get more than you expect with freshness.”

The food bank also gives their participants Food Bank Fresh Bucks. This program provides an additional \$2 for every \$2 in SNAP spent at local farmers markets. “It’s another service provided by the food bank to us and great to go to the market. I love to have fresh sugar snap peas or a head of lettuce.”



Tina

Food bank clients appreciate how the program helps them to buy directly from local growers. “You’re not going to a chain store,” added Brandon, a veteran who has lived here for eight years. “You’re going local to people who are probably making the same money as you do.”

The Food Bank Fresh Bucks program is vital for expanding the purchasing power of SNAP when benefits are inadequate to meet a household’s basic needs. “I go to the food bank first then go shopping so I see what I have and know what I need to supplement,” stated DeAnna, whose household’s SNAP benefits change drastically from month to month, based on her husband’s sales income. She added, “Most of the time, I go to the food bank so I can make payments on my medical bills.”

At any amount, SNAP benefits make an important difference, and the loss of SNAP is felt keenly. Rena’s earnings from her part-time job, combined with her husband’s wages, has put them over the income limit for SNAP. Nevertheless, they still struggle to make ends meet. “I have increased my need at the food bank to make the difference,” she said. “My family members who are gardening help with their abundance. I’m asking for more help and not letting anything go to waste.”

Emily and her husband Keith are raising their daughter Jessica on Emily’s cashier wages and Keith’s Social Security Disability Income. The total monthly amount is around \$3000, yet their household of three does not qualify for SNAP. The food bank helps them redirect their income to other costs, but it’s still not enough. “We sort of split our bills,” Emily said. “Can we put

that off until the next paycheck?”

Emily also described how they have built up credit card debt from charging their monthly bills. “A credit card causes its own problem,” said Rena. “You’re selling anything that you have as an asset that is monetarily beneficial, going to family members to borrow money. There’s rent, utility, food—if something bad happens, there’s no savings.”

“It’s a human right to be fed and to be clothed and sheltered, so any programs under those basic necessities of life to live—I think those should not be cut and should be fought for.”

—Rena

Programs like school meals, summer meals, and WIC can provide for or supplement meals that would otherwise have to be provided on a limited family budget, but these programs must be accessible to make a difference for a struggling family.

For example, school breakfast is free and available to all students in her school district, according to Rena, but students can miss breakfast, because it’s served before the start of the school day. Lorena, who has lived here for 25 years, said, “When the bus gets there, they’ve missed breakfast.”

This means Lorena’s kids are going through their school day hungry. Lorena continued, “They get back from school, the first thing they do is throw their backpack on the floor and open the fridge, and when they’re not

“How much do I take out of something else? Which will it be? Take from my food budget to provide for what I do need healthwise?”

in school, they're eating all day."

For families with infants, children under the age of 5, and pregnant or nursing moms, there's the WIC program. Katie's 3-year-old son loves the fruits that the program provides him, but WIC shoppers can get discouraged from using their benefits when they can't find the exact items that their checks allow them to purchase. "There was a woman in Safeway getting milk," said Tina, a retiree. "Whole milk was on sale, but she couldn't get it because she had her 2% milk WIC check."

This is a hassle for cashiers too. Emily described how at one chain store, cashiers pay the price if they make a mistake with a WIC sale: "We'd have to be so strict or it'd come out of our pocket if it went through and was wrong."

Nutrition assistance programs can fit together like puzzle pieces, but they must be accessible to meet their intended purpose of providing nutritious food to stretch limited budgets further. Strengthening these programs is an investment in the future health of our communities, and cutting these programs is detrimental. "Don't cut food stamps," said Jessica. "A lot of people depend on it. If they take it away, it would hurt a lot of people."

"I think of what the long-term effect will be," said Brandon. "If you cut SNAP now, kids will grow up with malnutrition. Are you willing to pay that?"

Danny has lived in this area for almost 33 years. He is unable to work due to chronic pain from a herniated disk. "I've been through four knee surgeries in the last two years, and now I'm looking at hip surgery," he said. "They referred me to a pain clinic, but they don't take state insurance anymore. I have to live with the pain."

Danny falls into a category of childless, working age adults, for whom there is very little public assistance. His monthly income is just \$200. He gets by with help from SNAP and living in low-income housing, for which his rent is \$3 because his income is so small. "I'm in, but there's a two-year waiting list," he explained. "I got lucky."

His rent does not include utilities costs. Danny continued, "I have to be very careful: I keep my lights off, and I keep my heat off."

Despite his disabling pain, Danny is trying to improve his opportunities for work, but he's encountered barriers. Danny described how there's one public bus that makes stops in the towns along the Skagit River, but the schedule



Danny

is too limited. "I was in school," he began, "but that made it even harder, more stressful. I had to be at school at 7:00 a.m. and wouldn't get home until 7:00 p.m.—that's four hours on the bus and back and waiting an hour in between."

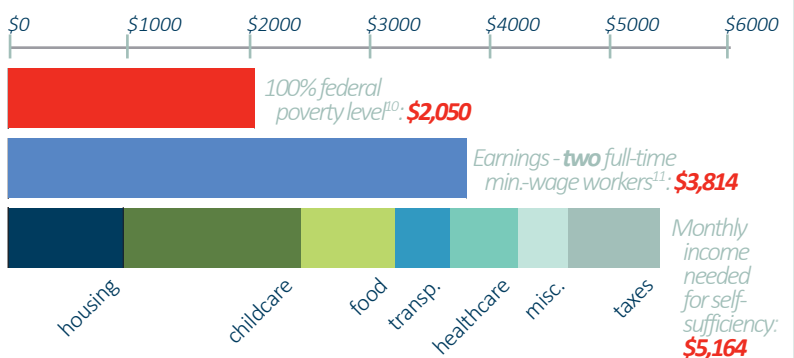
If stricter work requirements are created for people like Danny to receive SNAP or Medicaid, he would do his best to comply. "I'd fight through the pain," he said, "I'd make it happen." But Danny would be asked to do this despite losing assistance that can help mitigate his pain. "The meds I'm on keep me alive," he said. "I'd have to go back to the old ways—hustling on the streets just to get the medicine I need."

SKAGIT COUNTY:

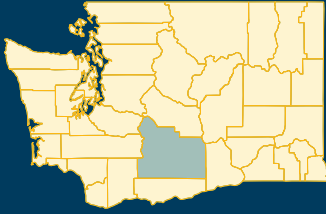
Unemployment (Sept. 2017) ⁴	4.7%
Social Security recipients (2016) ⁵	2.0% (2,453)
Schoolchildren eligible for subsidized meals (Oct. 2015) ⁶	
Skagit County	56.6% (4,422)
WIC recipients (2016) ⁷	5.0% (6,200)
Total served (Nov. 2016) ⁸ :	
■ Basic Food (SNAP)	18,464
■ Medical assistance	36,386
■ TANF cash assistance	921
■ ABD program clients	342

Monthly income needed for self-sufficiency⁹: **\$5,164**

Bottom bar of graph shows income for a family of four to meet basic needs in Skagit County.



YAKIMA COUNTY



Population³: Sunnyside—19,448;
Yakima County—73,486

Sunnyside

Boasting 300 days of sunshine every year, the town of Sunnyside is accurately named. The sunshine nourishes the fertile fields that are worked by growers and farm workers.

Living in a farming community brings hardship during the winter when farm work is scarce. “My husband works right now,” said Esmerelda, who stays at home to take care of the family’s young children. “We save a couple hundred, put it aside for the winter, so we can have sufficient money to pay the bills during the winter and a little bit more money for food.”

For those who are eligible, SNAP can supplement household food budgets, but some eligible seniors in our focus group did not want to apply. “We’ve never applied for food stamps. We have always worked,” said Beatrice, whose family migrated

back and forth from her home state of Texas until she and her husband Regino settled in Sunnyside 43 years ago. “We’re now living on Social Security. It’s not enough, so I just don’t go.”

One reason why seniors may be discouraged from applying is that they may only qualify for the minimum benefit. Esther’s family also migrated until her kids told her they wanted to settle down in Sunnyside nearly 40 years ago. She stated, “I was on the phone for one hour with DSHS, and they said, ‘You’re going to receive \$12.’ All this one hour on the phone for \$12? Forget it—what am I going to do with \$12 for the whole month?”

Families struggle to eat healthy without help from SNAP. “We lost every healthy thing,” said Erick, whose family is struggling to get by since his mother, Virginia, hurt her shoulder putting her out of work for two years. “We lost all the fruits and we lost all the vegetables, except for what we got at the food bank. We used to buy a lot of those things with food stamps.”

Virginia could use the extra help with getting more fruits and vegetables. “For two years, I’ve had no medical insurance,” she said. “I have diabetes and depression, and I can’t afford the co-pay.” Without insurance, Virginia is trying to manage her diabetes without medical intervention. “I get a lot of exercise and diet, because I can’t afford the medicine,” she explained.

Yolanda, who was born in the Yakima Valley, is also managing diabetes without seeing a doctor. “My husband’s medical bills are so high,” she said. “I let him go instead of me.” Her husband pays \$400 each month out of his paycheck for health

insurance, so they cannot afford dependent coverage. “I had breast cancer,” stated Yolanda. “I had to use all his credit cards to help me survive.”

Medical debt leaves struggling families with few options when they need to pay. Esther has health insurance, which was a lifesaver two years ago when she had to travel to Chicago for a complicated stomach surgery to remove a tumor that had burst. When asked what would happen if she lost her health insurance, Esther replied, “All we’d have to sell is the house so we could pay the bills.”

“When you reach my age, social security and retirement are important and should not be cut. Don’t forget that we worked hard for our money. It’s what we’ve been fighting for all these years.”

—Merced

Housing is another big expense on limited budgets. Having family can help offset costs. “My nephew is living with us,” said Esmerelda. “He helps us out.”

Combining households is one solution to paying the rent, but it may complicate finding a place to rent. “Some landlords don’t want three to four families in the house,” said Esther. “No kids, no pets.”

Merced and his wife Carlotta moved to Sunnyside 24 years ago. Speaking through a translator, Merced described how they pay \$200 per month in rent: “That’s half of my disability check,” he said. “It’s too high. Sometimes we don’t eat. The rent doesn’t let you eat.”



“It’s always a bad idea to cut a program that has shown results in helping people and will continue to show results in helping people.”

The food bank is the ultimate safety net for these families who otherwise would skip meals to pay the rent or pay for health care. But if one thing could be improved, participants would like to see more food given to larger households. “I have eight people, but they only give one box,” said Maria, whose favorite food is rice. “It probably doesn’t last one day.”

Nevertheless, Regino expressed a deep appreciation for this service that was universally felt by others. “Everything we get or receive is good. Whatever we get, we’re satisfied with it.”

“If we can get potatoes, beans, rice, oats, everything that they give us—there will never be hunger,” added Virginia. “And for that, I want to stay in this country, because back in Mexico, there’s a lot of hunger with my kids. There were whole days that we didn’t eat—not me or my kids. My children’s food when they went to school was tortillas and mayonnaise. I didn’t have money to pay for more.”

In a time when increased fear of deportation has deterred some immigrants from getting help, this fear is not felt here. “This is an agriculture state, and people value the workers,” said Vianca who works as a personal care assistant for her two grandmothers. “People feel more safe. They still feel more comfortable going to the food bank.”

Vianca works as a caretaker for her two grandmothers. She lives with her parents and other family members, contributing part of her pay towards the rent. “During the summer, it’s harder when my sister’s home: we’re 10 living in my home, so it’s hard.”

Vianca loves taking care of her family, but her job doesn’t pay much. “I make over \$800 a month,” she said, “but I have a car and other bills, so I maybe get \$100 for myself, and I have to pay for around the house expenses.”

This doesn’t leave much income for food, and their household does not qualify for food stamps, even though the income reported by her parents includes the rent money that Vianca pays them that helps pay for the family home. They get by on staples provided by the food bank. “Rice and beans is so little but makes so much,” Vianca explained. “It’s a little meal that goes a long way—a safe food, a comfort food.”

Vianca also helps at home by taking care of her sister’s children. “Usually, I have to take them to school,” she described. “They go before school starts to eat breakfast.”



Sometimes she needs to feed the kids at home because they miss breakfast in order to get more sleep. “My sister’s kids aren’t picky, but they like to eat healthy,” said Vianca. “It’s a lot more expensive. I try to keep them healthy and have money on top of going to school myself.”

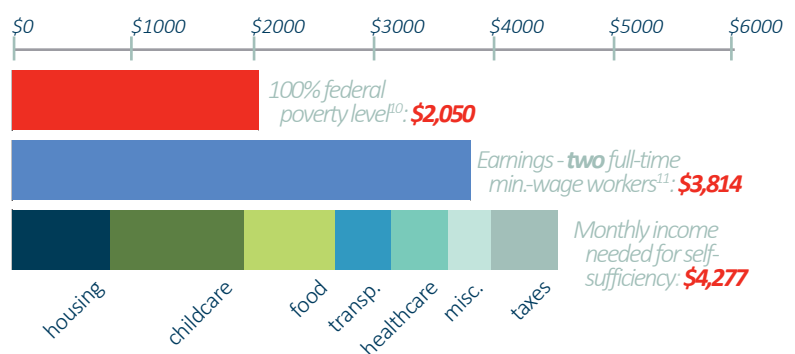
At college, Vianca completed a project studying homelessness in the Yakima Valley, and this has led her to conclude that food assistance programs must be protected. “Nobody should ever go hungry—no one should, but they do,” she said. “That’s why food programs should stay: if there’s no place to stay, you can still have food. Help people keep continuing to have food so they can continue to have a better life for themselves.”

YAKIMA COUNTY:

Unemployment (Sept. 2017) ⁴	4.5%
Social Security recipients (2016) ⁵	3.0% (7,417)
Schoolchildren eligible for subsidized meals (Oct. 2015) ⁶	
Yakima County	97.2% (6,843)
WIC recipients (2016) ⁷	3.5% (2,540)
Total served (Nov. 2016)⁸:	
Basic Food (SNAP)	59,917
Medical assistance	114,770
TANF cash assistance	4,258
ABD program clients	597

Monthly income needed for self-sufficiency⁹: **\$4,277**

Bottom bar of graph shows income for a family of four to meet basic needs in Yakima County.



CONCLUSION

At Northwest Harvest, we envision a Washington state that is free of hunger. When everyone in our communities has access to sufficient, nutritious food, all of us are better off. Food is essential to good health, and good health is essential to being a contributing, active, and engaged member of society.

To achieve this vision, we need smart, effective public policies and robust investment of public dollars into the ideas and programs that help all Washingtonians meet their basic needs. Essential needs programs have a solid track record of reducing hunger and poverty in our communities. We cannot afford to roll back years of progress that has been made; we must strengthen investments to help programs meet their full promise and potential to lift people out of poverty. These are our recommendations to help achieve this vision.



“They need to realize who hired them and who they work for. We are their boss; they are not our boss. They can also be brought down if we get together and elect people who do care. It’s us who allow them to be there.”

—Terry, Ocean Park

1. *Protect and strengthen SNAP*

- Preserve SNAP’s flexibility to meet need
- Increase benefits to ensure adequate nutrition
- Protect state options that increase efficiency and accuracy of payments
- Invest in employment and training

Last year, nearly 1 in 7 Washingtonians relied on SNAP: 62% of Washington’s SNAP participants are families with children; 29% live with a person with a disability or a senior; and 44% live in working families.¹³ SNAP is our first line of defense against hunger, helping low-income people purchase food. This in turn benefits all of us from the jobs and revenue created by this economic activity. Last year, SNAP pumped nearly \$1.5 billion back into Washington’s economy.¹⁴

It is essential for Congress to reject structural changes that limit SNAP’s ability to grow and contract according to need. Proposals that purport to provide states with flexibility to administer SNAP are block grants, plain and simple, and are dangerous, because SNAP would no longer be a safety net for any of us in times of economic hardship or financial setback from a disaster. The 2017 House budget resolution’s proposal to block grant SNAP would cut \$150 billion from SNAP over the next ten years. The annual loss of \$15 billion amounts to more than three times the operating budget of every single charitable food pantry in our nation.¹⁵ In other words, charity is not enough to make up for the loss of SNAP. We would no doubt see more hunger in our streets.

We must also increase SNAP benefits to ensure that people

can buy adequate amounts of nutritious food. The average SNAP participant currently has less than \$4 per day in food assistance. Updating SNAP allotments to be based on the Low Cost Food Plan would raise benefits and is based on a calculated food budget that is better designed to meet basic nutrition needs. As a result, SNAP recipients would be healthier and able to afford a greater variety of palatable, more nutritious food.

Additionally, many low-income seniors who live on a fixed income qualify for the minimum monthly benefit of just \$15 per month.¹⁶ Fixed incomes barely cover basic needs for housing, health care, and utility costs, leaving little money for food. Raising the minimum benefit would not only make it more affordable for seniors to purchase the nutritious food they need to be active and independent, but it would also provide more incentive for seniors to complete the application process which would connect them to other needed services.

States must also retain flexibility to increase administrative efficiencies and improve payment accuracy. State options, such as categorical eligibility (opening the doors to apply for SNAP to people with a higher gross income because their net income is at or below poverty) and heat and eat (providing a standard utility deduction for households receiving \$20 or more in utility assistance) help SNAP benefits reach more eligible people while reducing red tape and wasteful administrative burdens of processing.

Finally, we share a vision that individuals who receive SNAP who are able to work, should work, but we must also acknowledge the reality that the vast majority of unemployed people on SNAP

either cannot work due to age or disability or are unable to find steady work that pays livable wages. In fact, SNAP helps 1 in 8 Washington workers put food on their tables.¹⁷ Imposing stricter work requirements is not the answer, especially in areas where jobs can't be found or where there aren't support services to help people find and keep a job. In those cases, work requirements are harsh punishment when our private and public sectors have failed to create adequate work opportunities. We should instead invest in SNAP Employment and Training programs, and Washington already leads the way in this field, partnering with community colleges, nonprofit organizations, and businesses to provide education, job training, and case management support that has helped many SNAP recipients in every county find and retain jobs that pay good wages, higher than minimum wage.

This program cannot exist without SNAP, and as such, this is proof that if we want to get hungry, low income people back on their feet and working, the answer is not SNAP cuts—it's protecting and strengthening this vital program.

2. Increase access to nutritious food

- Protect our food safety net
- Expand marketing opportunities for Washington growers
- Increase the purchasing power of SNAP to buy more fruits and vegetables

There is a constellation of nutrition assistance programs that meet targeted nutritional needs for low income people. Low income households combine support provided by food banks with resources provided by programs like SNAP, school

meals, and senior vouchers for the farmers market, in order to take care of the whole household's basic nutrition needs. We must continue to protect investments in these programs and work on expanding access while reducing service provider barriers to ensure that these programs are reaching all eligible people in need.

At the state level, we can increase access to nutritious food for all of us if Washington growers have the support they need to expand and diversify their opportunities to sell their products directly to consumers through farmers markets or to provide farm fresh ingredients in meals served at restaurants, schools, senior centers, and other institutions. The Washington State Department of Agriculture (WSDA) is home to the Regional Markets program which provides technical assistance, training resources, and fosters relationships to help farmers grow their businesses. In 2017, the Legislature made a partial restoration of funding that had been cut from the Regional Markets team in 2011. In 2018, we should restore more funding and put this in the baseline budget so that this investment carries forward in the next budget cycle.

Washington has been at the forefront of expanding abilities to purchase more fruits and vegetables with SNAP dollars, thanks to a USDA Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive (FINI) grant. Over \$3.45 million in fruit and vegetable SNAP bonuses have been distributed and have been accessed through 168 supermarkets, 80 farmers markets, and 8 health systems.¹⁸ With help from FINI, SNAP shoppers are able to purchase the fruits and vegetables that

they need and crave but that are otherwise less affordable on an average SNAP benefit of \$125 per month. If we want to help more SNAP shoppers buy nutritious food, we should continue to support SNAP bonus programs which are a smart investment: they help increase purchases, which generates more economic benefit in our communities while making healthy eating more affordable.

3. Help kids and infants get the healthiest start

- Increase access and participation in school meals for low-income kids
- Reduce barriers to redeeming WIC benefits
- Streamline funding to provide seamless meals for kids year-round

Washington is home to a beautiful landscape that is inviting for families and kids to play outdoors. But kids can't be healthy for school or play if they don't have consistent access to nutritious meals. In our state which is rich in agriculture, there is just no excuse for childhood hunger, yet our state is failing our low-income kids: we rank 45th in the nation when it comes to participation in school breakfast¹⁹ and 36th in the nation when it comes to participation in summer meals programs.²⁰

Common sense solutions to childhood hunger are at our fingertips. For starters, let's make 2018 the year that we finally pass legislation to have high-need schools make breakfast available during the school day, just like lunch. Currently, most schools serve breakfast before the start of the school day so if a child can't get to school before the first bell, they miss out on a nutritious breakfast. If breakfast is available during the school day,

CONCLUSION *(CONT.)*

then kids are present at school to buy or redeem their free meal. The more meals served, the more schools redeem in revenue and reimbursements. When kids eat breakfast, they can focus on learning: we'll see less absenteeism and behavioral outbursts and improved academic performance.

Schools and school districts that are eligible for the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) should explore whether it makes financial sense for them to enroll, since this has been a proven effective tool in increasing participation in school meals.²¹ CEP allows high poverty, high-need schools where a significant number of students directly qualify for free or reduced priced meals, to do away with paper applications and focus their efforts on providing universal free meals. Washington should work on increasing accuracy in directly certifying SNAP households for the school meals program in order to identify our full potential slate of CEP eligible schools and school districts.

Participants in our focus groups universally liked the healthy food they were able to purchase for their children or while pregnant or nursing with benefits from WIC, but we can make it easier for WIC shoppers and WIC vendors by reducing confusion over what counts as a qualified purchase at grocery stores. The state should consider adopting and improving 21st century technology, such as online clinic appointment management or shopping apps for smart phones in order to increase access to nutrition education, support services, and clear pictures of qualifying purchase items.

Lastly, we can break down a barrier for meal providers by streamlining the two separate

funding streams that pay for summer meals sites and after school meal sites. If the two funding streams were combined into one, such has been proposed in the past by The Summer Meals Act, co-sponsored by Representative Rick Larsen, service providers could provide seamless, year-round meals, and thereby strengthen efforts to help kids access nutritious meals where they live, go to school, and play.

4. *Support access to affordable and safe housing*

- Increase funding for housing and homelessness programs
- End Source of Income Discrimination
- Protect investments in supportive services to keep vulnerable people housed

There's a growing homelessness problem in our state that we can end if we do three things: invest in building and increasing the availability of safe and affordable housing, end discrimination in the private market, and invest in support services to help vulnerable people find and stay in housing.

Increasing the availability of safe and affordable housing requires public investment. Increasing the Housing Trust Fund in the capital budget helps provide money to build, improve, or maintain upkeep on affordable housing units. The Legislature should also build upon the work done in the last session to increase and make permanent the designation of document recording fees for housing and homelessness programs. Doing this will help local governments define and invest in sound plans to end homelessness in ten years without fear of losing important state dollars that are

necessary for implementation.

We can make a dent on discrimination in the private market by passing legislation to end Source of Income Discrimination. This would prevent the denial of a housing application to a qualified tenant who reports having some public assistance and would open up more eligible housing for people who are lucky enough to have a Section 8 voucher to actually redeem that voucher.

Lastly, we should protect investments in the Aged Blind Disabled/Housing and Essential Needs programs that provide cash assistance and supportive services to help people with disabilities and other challenges that can be a barrier to maintaining safe and affordable housing.

5. *Provide access to affordable health cares*

- Protect our state's success in expanding access to health care provided by the Affordable Care Act
- Reauthorize the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP)

Washington's uninsured rate has been cut in half, thanks to provisions from the Affordable Care Act, including expansion of Medicaid, health care subsidies, and access to the state's market exchange.²² We cannot afford to roll back this progress: without access to affordable

"You're dealing with health care issues continuously no matter what age you are. I'm also dealing with getting food, small children, transportation, and housing."

—Rachel, Nespelem

health insurance, households can be vulnerable to hunger when they face medical debt. Congress should take action to pass bipartisan legislation that stabilizes our insurance markets, protects Medicaid expansion, rejects structural changes or funding cuts to Medicaid or Medicare, and protects insurance consumers from discrimination based on pre-existing conditions.

Congress should also take immediate action to fully reauthorize CHIP. CHIP has had bipartisan support in the past, but Congress failed to reauthorize this program before it expired on Sept. 30, 2017. Without reauthorization, federal funding cannot be dispersed to states, and in Washington, nearly 67,000 kids,²³ as well as income-eligible pregnant women, are at risk of losing their health insurance if the state cannot afford to pay the millions of dollars needed to provide a backfill.

6. Address hunger at its root causes in poverty and disparity

- Restore the promise of TANF
- Support efforts that create steady jobs with livable wages
- Pass the Fair Chance Act

Hunger is a symptom of poverty. It persists in households that do not have enough income and resources to put food on the table. Those households face deep-seated structural barriers that have been ingrained in our culture and in our policies, limiting opportunities for economic growth. We must shore up efforts to ensure economic growth opportunities for all Washingtonians.

We can start by restoring the promise of the Temporary

Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program which was intended to provide cash assistance and supportive services to families with children so that parents can find and keep better paying work. Because TANF is a block grant, our state has passed policies and made budget decisions that have chipped away at these support services and the length of time that families can receive assistance: as a result, TANF is not reaching its potential to help families in need. We must work to restore the promise of TANF, including eliminating asset limits so that income eligible families may keep meager savings or a reliable vehicle that can help them maintain economic stability as they transition back to work, restoring the cash grant to buy necessities like hygiene products or pay the rent, and commit to reinvesting underspent dollars back into the support services that TANF is supposed to provide instead of redirecting these to other areas of our state budget.

We should also support efforts that create better paying jobs that offer stable work schedules so that families can be self-sufficient on their earnings and take care of their needs with employer sponsored benefits.

Lastly, we should reduce a barrier to employment for people with prior felony convictions, by passing the Fair Chance Act which would prohibit asking about prior convictions at the first screening for a job. Nothing prohibits a potential employer from asking at another step in the hiring process, but this would allow more qualified candidates to get their foot in the door. Employers will benefit from a larger pool of qualified applicants, and we can reduce recidivism and hunger for people who have served their time and are

looking for a new start on life.

7. Clean up our upside-down tax code

- Close outdated loopholes
- Expand tax credits for middle and low-income families

To make the investments that are necessary for a healthy and hunger free Washington, we must have the public dollars to pay our bills. Our Legislature and Congress should examine tax loopholes, ensuring that they are meeting their intended purposes of creating jobs and providing for the common good or else end them to generate more revenue to pay for investments in our communities. Tax credits that help middle and low income families, including the Earned Income Tax Credit and the Child Tax Credit, should be expanded to help these families pay for essential services and basic needs.

Join Us!

Northwest Harvest has set an ambitious goal for ourselves: we aim to cut hunger in half by 2028. We will continue to relieve the immediate pangs of hunger by distributing nutritious food to our statewide network of 375 food pantries, meal programs, and high-need schools, but to reach this goal, we will need to deepen partnerships with the public and private sectors, pass public policies and budget investments, and energize communities to identify common sense solutions to hunger based on local needs and resources. We can't do this work without you. Please join us in our advocacy work—together, we can make Washington an even better place for all of us to call home.

PROCESS AND POVERTY MEASURES

Process

Focus groups were held in 2017 at five locations across Washington, representing rural, urban, and suburban areas in Asotin, Pacific, Skagit, and Yakima Counties and in two districts of the Colville Confederated Tribes Reservation.

Food bank staff recruited clients representing a range of ages and life circumstances. Staff informed all participants that the group was not a requirement of receiving food. Northwest Harvest paid participants \$30 for attending the two-hour focus group and offered snacks during the session. Northwest Harvest staff members conducted the groups, following a transcript of 45 questions we ask each year. Some participants chose to remain anonymous; those whose photos and names appear here have given informed consent.

Poverty Measures

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

Self-Sufficiency Standard⁹

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-age child). The guidelines used come from The Self-Sufficiency Standard for Washington State, developed by Dr. Diana Pearce of the

University of Washington. Dr. Pearce developed a methodology for calculating the costs of basic necessities for families of different sizes in different areas of the state. These numbers are updated periodically, and for this report, we use the most recent numbers available. The graphs demonstrate that families above the official poverty guideline fall far short of having the resources necessary to meet their basic needs.

100% of federal poverty¹⁰ The official measure of poverty in the U.S. was developed in 1963, based on the cost of a basic food diet for a household, multiplied by three to estimate that household's expenses. Experts believe the current poverty measure is flawed because of changes in family expenses over the past four decades, with the costs of housing, health care, and childcare taking a significantly larger share of a household budget.

In 2010, the U.S. Census Bureau released the **Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM)²⁴** This measure takes into consideration the costs of food, housing, utilities, and clothing. It also takes into consideration governmental non-cash benefits, such as food stamps, and is adjusted according to regional differences in cost of living. Under the SPM, 44.7 million Americans were poor in 2016, or 4 million more people than under the official definition of poverty.

The Supplemental Poverty Measure does not replace the official poverty measure, which is still used to determine eligibility for benefits like Medicaid, Medicare, and the federal food stamp program called SNAP, but we call your attention to it here, because it is also a measure that shows the significant role that safety net programs can play for low-income households. For instance, according to the SPM, last year, SNAP lifted nearly 3.6 million people above the poverty line, a measure not reflected in the federal poverty measure.¹⁹ Since the supplemental measure has not been adopted as the official federal measure of poverty, we continue to use the federal poverty thresholds and compare it to the Self Sufficiency Standard to portray poverty in the counties that were visited for this year's focus group report.

Minimum Wage¹¹ Included in our data section for each county is a measure showing earnings for two adults working full-time at minimum wage. Since Washington has one of the highest state minimum wages in the nation at \$11 per hour for 2016, some may think that level of pay would be adequate to sustain a household. The graph shows that even with two people working full-time at minimum wage of \$11 per hour in 2017, they fell short of meeting self-sufficiency standard in that county.

ANNOTATED REFERENCES



^[1] Household Food Security in the United States in 2016, ERR-237: <https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/84973/err-237.pdf?v=42979>

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“[Politicians] need to realize who hired them and who they work for. We are their boss; they are not our boss. They can also be brought down if we get together and elect people who do care. It’s us who allow them to be there.”

—Terry, Ocean Park

Northwest Harvest strongly encourages readers of this report to take action 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.

Find your Legislative and Congressional Districts:
<http://app.leg.wa.gov/districtfinder/>

Learn how to get in touch with your federal, state, and local elected leaders:
<https://www.usa.gov/elected-officials>

Join Northwest Harvest in the fight to end hunger in Washington:
<http://www.northwestharvest.org/take-action>



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