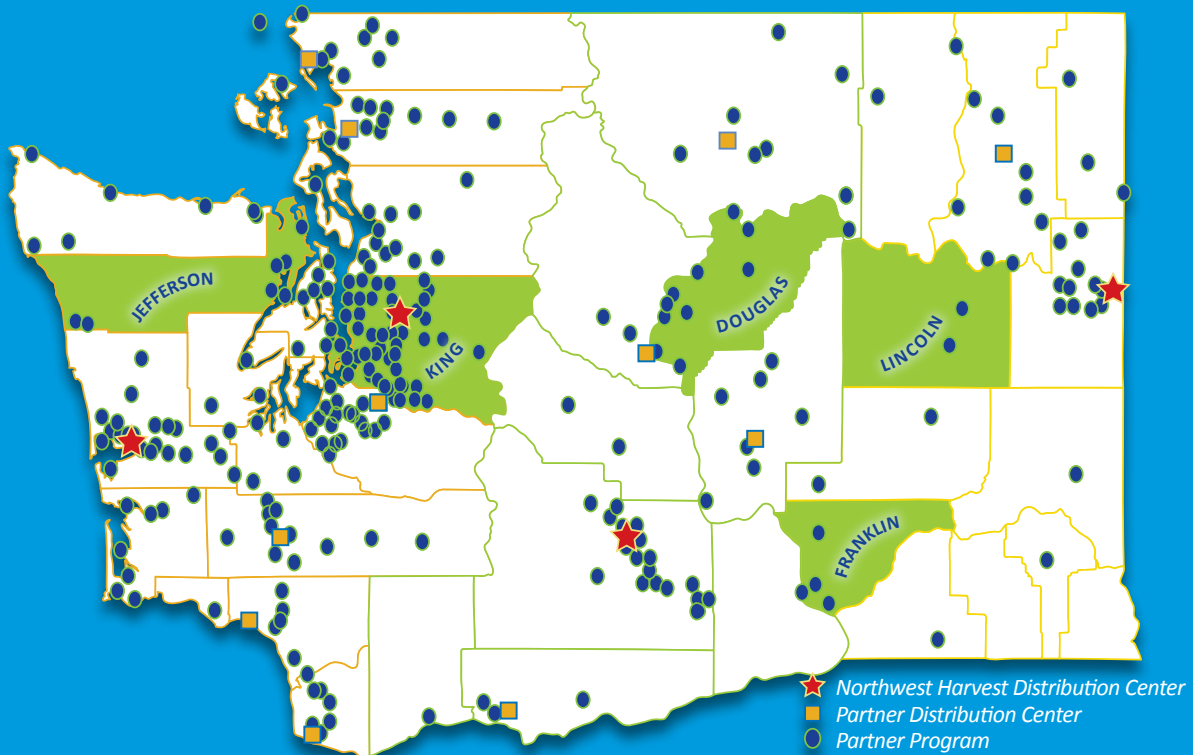




Focus on Food Security: *Getting By With Much Less*

Northwest Harvest's Focus Group Report 2015

FEEDING OUR NEIGHBORS IN NEED STATEWIDE THROUGH A NETWORK OF MORE THAN 370
FOOD BANKS, MEAL PROGRAMS AND HIGH-NEED SCHOOLS.



NORTHWEST HARVEST

Northwest Harvest is Washington's own statewide hunger relief agency. Our mission is to provide nutritious food to hungry people statewide in a manner that respects their dignity, while fighting to eliminate hunger.

Last fiscal year we distributed 32 million pounds of food to a network of more than 370 food banks, meal programs and high-need schools across the state.

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Focus on Food Security: Getting By With Much Less

Our Focus on Food Security 2015 report tells the stories of food bank recipients in Sprague, Bridgeport, Pasco, Issaquah, and Port Townsend, Washington. Their stories remind us that hunger is pervasive on both sides of the Cascades, in rural or suburban areas, and in every community.

Each year, Northwest Harvest conducts five focus groups across our state, asking people who use food banks about their experiences living with hunger and poverty. Their words inform our work and, in particular, our public policy agenda, a key tactic in the fight to end hunger.

As we look forward to our state and federal advocacy work for 2015, we are keenly aware that the Child Nutrition Reauthorization Act is before Congress this year. Many parents and grandparents spoke poignantly about their struggles to feed children and the critical impact of state and federal child nutrition programs to help them thrive and be focused on

learning, at home, at school and at play.

Children are an important segment of those served by food banks, but there are many reasons people turn to the emergency food system. Surprising to many, food banks are serving record numbers—even higher than during the recession. The reasons are varied and complex, as illustrated by these stories and supported by statistical research. Together, they form a picture that is both heart-wrenching and hopeful; heart-wrenching because of the devastating impact of hunger and poverty on people's lives, and hopeful because there are solutions, as you will see in Conclusions.

Our heartfelt gratitude goes to those who courageously shared their stories of hunger, struggle and resilience. We are honored to present their words here and to work by their side to make a better Washington for all.



Shelley Rotondo, Chief Executive Officer

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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For more information regarding public policy, please contact:

Christina Wong, Public Policy Manager - 206.923.7465; christinaw@northwestharvest.org

For more information regarding the Focus Group Project or for additional copies of this report, please contact:

Bonnie Baker, Director of Hunger Response Network - 206.923.7440; bonnieb@northwestharvest.org

Access previous years' reports at:

northwestharvest.org/Focus-on-Food-Security

INTRODUCTION

Focus on Food Security 2015 details the stories heard in focus groups held in five counties across the state of Washington: Lincoln, Douglas, Franklin, Jefferson, and King. In the following pages, you will meet working parents, retirees, military veterans, people who have worked hard to support their families and community but for whom the American dream remains out of reach.

Why out of reach now, with all the news about an economic recovery? Why are food banks serving even higher numbers now than during the recession, and why does food insecurity persist? Here are some of the reasons cited:

- Lack of living-wage jobs
- High cost of living
- Cuts to food stamp benefits
- Medical emergencies resulting in debt and dietary restrictions
- Food deserts that lack affordable, nutritious food because there is no grocery store, no summer meal site, or no transportation to services miles away.

For almost a decade, Northwest Harvest has written this report as a vehicle for bringing the stories of people who rely on food banks to our state and federal lawmakers. Their stories and the statistical data underlying this

report inform and educate elected officials who make difficult decisions, protecting or cutting programs and services that help families meet their basic needs, improve our education system and increase public safety.

Those decisions are ones that no one wants to make, but as difficult as those decisions are, they have a direct impact on the painful choices that many of those using food banks must make on a daily basis: perhaps it's the choice between food or life-sustaining medicine, or the choice between feeding a child lunch or paying the rent to keep a roof over a child's head.

Sometimes the decisions made in the halls of Olympia or our nation's capital mean that low-income people have no choice at all. On Nov. 1, 2013, every household that received help from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, Basic Food, formerly "food stamps") saw a cut to their benefits: the average household of four lost \$36 per month from their food budget.¹

A majority of our focus group participants received SNAP benefits at the time, and

all were impacted. One year later, they talked about how they have compensated for the loss of food assistance—sometimes they simply don't eat.

Cuts to food assistance and safety net services are not viable solutions for reducing a deficit. They hurt people who need a stable floor on which they can build a future. We hope that the snapshots provided in this report, combined with our recommendations and conclusions, will result in the just changes low-income people need to be self-sufficient: more jobs that pay living wages; strengthening of food and other assistance programs that help them feed, clothe and shelter themselves and their families.

We are grateful to the 65 participants who shared their experiences of living with hunger and poverty. We hope that you, too, will be moved by their stories of resiliency and generosity with each other and their communities.

We hope they will move you to take action, improving outcomes for all of us by ensuring that those of us most in need are heard and not forgotten.



LINCOLN COUNTY



Population: Sprague—429²;
Lincoln County—10,301³

Sprague

Barriers to food security:

- Lack of affordable, nutritious food in the community
- Distance from communities with services and lack of transportation
- Limited food bank hours and choices for special dietary needs

At the heart of tiny Sprague sits Kathy's Drug and Variety Store which proudly displays the proprietor's name and phone number on the front window.

Kathy's is the only grocery store in town. "It's quite a lot of money but good for the basics if you have to get

it," said Dorothy, a senior citizen and owner of three businesses. A store in town, although limited and expensive, is better than nothing. "I don't know what we'd do without Kathy's here," added Laura, a Sprague resident for 14 years.

According to Kevin, a Chicago native who moved to the region 26 years ago, the nearest full-service grocery stores are in Spokane or Cheney, making it a 50-mile round trip. The distance from larger chain grocery stores is a barrier to accessing food because the high cost of gas to make the trip is unaffordable for low-income residents. Every one of our focus group participants said that they can afford to make the trip to shop at a larger grocery store just once a month.

Distance is a barrier to food access. The community makes the best of a challenging situation. Dale, a military veteran whose white beard and twinkling eyes has garnered him the annual role of playing the town Santa Claus said, "I call around to my neighbors and tell them I'm headed to town so if anyone needs anything I can pick it up for them."

Residents have few alternatives for getting food for their families. Michael, who lives with and takes care of elderly parents, said that planting a home garden is not

a viable option. "Trying to grow a garden is difficult," Michael said. "Weather like this week works against you. We have warm weather, and things start to grow, then a cold snap stumps everything and it takes a week to get going again."

As a result, the town food bank is elevated in importance as a food resource for hungry families in Sprague. For Claudette, who moved to Sprague in 1986, the food bank ends up being her primary resource for food: "I supplement through things I buy or canned goods."

Yet the food bank is no substitute for a grocery store: unlike a store that is open seven days a week, participants can only visit the food bank once a month. Grocery stores also offer shoppers a variety of produce and goods, unlike food banks where the variety of food donated may be limited at times. Claudette added, "When you're raising a family and you need to put things on the table, you need to have enough variety." The food bank cannot offer that variety, but Claudette rationalized, "It may not be what you want, but you've got food."

Variety and choice are even more important when it comes to residents who have dietary restrictions due to health problems. Diana, who lives with her adult son and helps take care of her five grandsons, has diabetes. There are times when Diana has difficulty getting enough food from the food bank that meets her dietary needs. "I go without meals which is not good for a diabetic at all," she said. "I keep close watch on my blood sugar. There are times when I just skip or I plan my meals when I can have one good solid meal one day and light meals the other days so I can feed my family."

Skipping meals so that children can eat



"I go without meals which is not good for a diabetic at all," she said. "I keep close watch on my blood sugar. There are times when I just skip or I plan my meals when I can have one good solid meal one day and light meals the other days so I can feed my family."

Ellen and Mac are married to each other and recently moved to Sprague after living in Spokane for six years. The couple used to receive food stamps to supplement their wages, saving what they could for their retirement, but they were laid off during the recession.

“Getting unemployment knocked us off of food stamps,” said Ellen. Getting checks from unemployment insurance made them ineligible for food stamps, but work remains scarce. A partisan divide in Congress over extending unemployment left the couple cutting corners and dipping into retirement savings to survive.

“We do just about everything we can to conserve,” stated Mac. “What’s going to increase the probability of my having some kind of eating budget that I can make? Maybe it comes out of savings we saved our whole lives for. It’s not working long term. It’s not motivating you to reach old age.”

Programs like SNAP and unemployment are meant to be there to help people like Ellen and Mac who need the income to pay for necessities while they look for work, but program cuts are pulling the floor out from underneath them.

“The money and mechanisms are there,” advised Mac. Ellen added, “Food stamps need to be improved. Medicare can’t be messed with. Democrats and Republicans need to work together.”



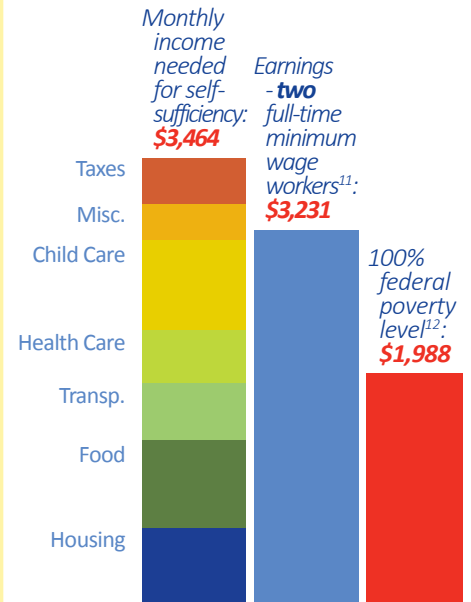
is a common but certainly not an ideal way to make do with limited allotments and access to food. During the school year, children can count on getting meals at school, but when schools close for the summer, caretakers must find even more food to feed hungry kids who are home during the day. “In the summer, it hurts,” said Diana about the increased need for food.

Summer in Sprague hurts even more now that the summer meals site at the town park has closed because the program’s facilitator has retired. The nearest summer meal site to Sprague is again 25 miles away in Cheney.⁴ So what will families do now? “Stretch food farther. Find some way to stretch what we have here,” offered Diana.

LINCOLN COUNTY:

Unemployment (Aug. 2014) ⁵	5.0%
Social Security recipients (2013) ⁶	28% (2,940)
Schoolchildren eligible for subsidized meals (Oct. 2014, Sprague School District) ⁷	62% (44)
WIC recipients (2013) ⁸	3.5% (368)
Total served, June 2014:	
■ Basic Food (SNAP) ^{9a}	1116
■ Medical assistance ^{9b}	603
■ TANF cash assistance ^{9c}	105

Monthly income needed for self-sufficiency¹⁰: **\$3,464**



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

DOUGLAS COUNTY



Population: Bridgeport—2,423²;
Douglas County—39,471³

Bridgeport

Barriers to food security:

- Jobs are seasonal, income limited
- Limited food supplies command high prices in season
- Summer brings the loss of school meals for children and reduced food bank hours

Located in an area rich with wheat fields and orchards, Bridgeport is impacted, for better or for worse, by harvest seasons and the employment opportunities that are available with local growers.

“It’s harvest time,” said Amber, a resident on the Colville Reservation,

“and everything is sold out.” Amber went on to explain that busloads of seasonal farm workers who pass through town on their way to jobs in Wenatchee and Omak stock up on groceries at Bridgeport stores, clearing the shelves.

According to Amber, the stores respond to this influx of shoppers by stocking up on more international foods and by raising their prices. “Everything is going up except for your check,” said Cleadia, who supports her household of three adults with her Social Security benefits.

The food bank helps, but during the summer months, it is only open once a month. It’s open twice a month during the rest of the year, but the food only lasts for two to three days for a household of two adults.

The result is a hardship for local residents. Diana, a young, married mother of a two-year-old son and a newborn daughter, said, “Sometimes there is not enough food. This month I’m running out of food. I’m out of beans, meat, cheese. I make tortillas and I have eggs. I make this until the food bank is open.”

Grocers may replenish store shelves by the winter, but by then, residents face a new food access challenge: a lack of income for buying food. The local farms

provide most of the jobs in this area and during the winter months, jobs are scarce. Amber explained that winter farm jobs are mostly pruning, work that employers hire men to do, not women. The work is physically labor intensive and weather conditions limit the availability of work hours. Diana added, “When it’s snowing, they only work three to four hours a day.”

Food stamps and other government safety net programs are integral to helping low-income residents meet their basic needs. For Diana, the thing that she likes best about food stamps is, “It helps us to buy food. You can go to the store if you need something.”

Using food stamps means that there is money for other items in a household budget: “I buy household supplies—toilet paper, dish soap, bath soap, laundry soap—and then save my food stamps for food,” said Cindy, who works part-time providing care for an elderly woman with dementia. Others agreed, citing medicine, electric bills and rent as household expenses they are able to pay thanks to having food stamps for groceries.

Diana also gets help from WIC to make sure that she and her two young children have nutritious food: “Right now I’m nursing. They give me six bottles of milk, two bags of bread, two bags of beans—it helps me out. I get \$10 for buying vegetables and fruits at stores.”

Free meals for kids during the summer are also available to help families, but transportation is a barrier to participation in the program. “Summer meals only work when you live in town,” said Amber. “Half of this area is rural and you can’t get to them. I feed my neighbor’s kids. They can’t go to town.”

The subsidized school lunch program also



DIANA

“We pay the more important like rent, and electricity, and water, and diapers—pay those first. For food, we could buy a little bit of food or go to the food bank. If you don’t pay rent they kick you out. Electricity, they cut it off. Same with water, but diapers...”

Isabel has lived in Bridgeport for 18 years. She and her husband have three children and three grandchildren. All of her family members who are old enough to work find seasonal work with local farms.

Winter can be hard on the family when jobs dry up with the end of the harvest season. “There are months when we can’t buy clothes or shoes—especially in November through February,” explained Isabel. “We save during the summer so hopefully we can buy during the winter.”

The family needs assistance with food during the off season, but they only ask for help when they need to do so: “In winter time, on the breaks, we have food stamps, but not during the summer because we have work income. The amount they give me is helpful but isn’t enough for the whole month.”

Isabel and her husband prioritize paying the rent and other bills, forgoing food and other needs to make ends meet. “Thank god we don’t get sick very often,” she said. “Ten years ago, we just covered myself and my husband but health insurance is too expensive now.” That became a problem last winter: “I got really sick with the flu. I went to the hospital for two hours and had a bill between \$800 and \$900, but the hospital helped so I only had to pay part.”

Isabel asks her elected representatives in Congress and in the State Legislature: “Give medical insurance to people because it’s really important, and continue to give food stamps.” She added, “Thank you for taking care of us and the people who need us.”



helps with feeding kids when money is tight at home, but when school is closed for breaks, the added cost of lunch for hungry kids is keenly felt. Having family helps relieve the strain: “When my kids are on spring break and summer vacation they go to grandma’s,” stated Cindy. “The week before school they come home, get their school supplies and off to school they go.”

When asked what advice she has for

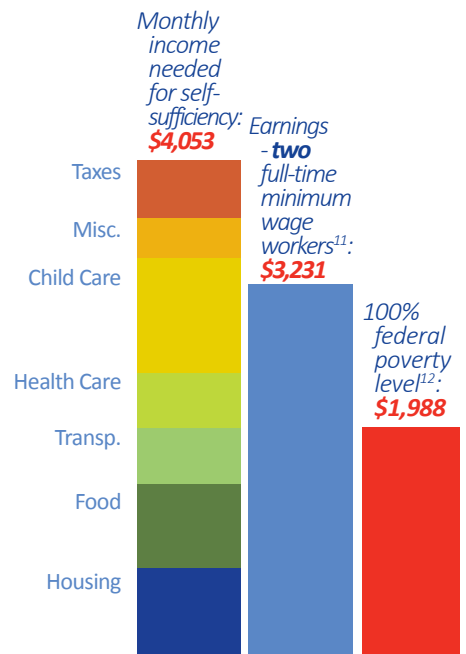
her elected representatives, Cindy said, “Kids need nutrition. Don’t cut food stamps or kids’ programs for breakfast or lunch at school.”

Amber suggested that elected officials should “live on food stamps for a week and see how well they do. Double, triple that amount because \$4 a day to feed a family is not enough.”

DOUGLAS COUNTY:

Unemployment (Aug. 2014) ⁵	5.0%
Social Security recipients (2013) ⁶	19% (7,345)
Schoolchildren eligible for subsidized meals (Oct. 2014, Bridgeport School District) ⁷	82% (668)
WIC recipients (2013) ⁸	3.8% (1,472)
Total served, June 2014:	
▪ Basic Food (SNAP) ^{9a}	5,787
▪ Medical assistance ^{9b}	3,083
▪ TANF cash assistance ^{9c}	411

Monthly income needed for self-sufficiency¹⁰: **\$4,053**



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

KING COUNTY



Population: Issaquah—33,566²;
King County—2,044,449³

Issaquah

Barriers to food security:

- Coping with sudden loss of jobs and income
- Cuts to SNAP mean food stamps don't last the month
- Low-wages too little to live on, yet working results in loss of aid

Issaquah's lush mountain valley setting might make it difficult to remember that hunger is pervasive, even in this Seattle suburb that is home to many employees of Boeing, Microsoft and Costco. Our Issaquah focus group included a couple

of participants who were fairly new to using a food bank and government food assistance programs. They are a reminder of how life's circumstances can change dramatically in an instant.

"I've known about this [food bank] for two years but have not come out of shame and embarrassment," said Debera, who said that employment agencies tell her that their clients do not want to work with her now that she is 60. "I've watched my prosperous life disappear. The abundance I've received for the last seven weeks has helped shift me back into knowing this is a friendly universe. I'm very grateful and embarrassed at the same time."

"There's a mental block, ego, pride, dignity thing," agreed Keli, a New Jersey native and single mother of a four-year-old son. "Living in Issaquah Highlands, going through a divorce, I thought, 'I don't need this. There are people who are worse off.' I went online, did searches. It was overwhelming and blurring, but then I came to the food bank. It was talking with all those people that I was able to realize all the resources."

Among the resources that Keli learned about is the food stamp program. "I didn't realize it can be used at so many retailers: Trader Joe's, Safeway,

farmer's markets," she explained. "It's so humbling, so amazing that we can support our local community and shop fresh, organic produce."

Food stamps provide assistance to low-income people to buy food, but the benefits are frequently inadequate to meet household needs. Terra has a 19-year-old son. They take turns mowing their neighbor's lawn in exchange for some food. She said, "I'm on SSI. I get less food stamps than everyone else. I get \$128. There's literally no way to survive on that."

When food stamps were cut on Nov. 1, 2013, Terra's monthly benefits were cut by \$50. "That's when I started coming to the food bank every week," she explained.

For Tammy, who also lives on Social Security, her monthly benefits went from \$12 to \$8. What can one do with \$8 in food assistance? "I save it up for two to three months then I get a bulk thing of flour, my staples that will last. I have not seen as much at the food bank. I can make pancakes or biscuits for baking and that kind of thing."

For others, the food bank is the only food assistance they get. "My husband works so we don't get food assistance," said Debbie, an Issaquah resident for 35 years who provides full-time care for her two-year-old grandson. "It's not enough to survive on, so we use the food bank."

Jenny is raising two teenagers and a 20-year-old. She used to get \$16 per month in food stamps but that was cut so now she relies on the food bank to feed herself and her family. She said about the food bank, "They say right on the form that it's a supplemental food program but there are times when it's the only food. Middle of the month, it's the only food. I have to make it last."



"There's a mental block, ego, pride, dignity thing," agreed Keli, a New Jersey native and single mother of a four-year-old son. "Living in Issaquah Highlands, going through a divorce, I thought, 'I don't need this. There are people who are worse off.'"

“Two years ago I was in a coma. I lost everything,” said Shirley, who is trying to put her life back together after the trauma. “Things build up. I’m trying to recover.”

Shirley supports her family with food assistance from the food bank and income from her job and Social Security benefits. It’s difficult, especially since she has medical bills to pay from her hospitalization. “I make little payments,” she said. “That’s all you can do.”

Finding a paying job should have helped Shirley, but her meager income may have resulted in a setback: she is no longer eligible for assistance from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly “food stamps.”) She said, “I just recently got cut. I got a job in the middle of July and DSHS said you’re over the limit by a few dollars so I was totally cut out for August.”

Losing eligibility for food stamps was especially painful since it happened during the summer when Shirley’s children don’t have access to free meals at school. That means Shirley has to find food for their lunches but with less income to buy food.

Shirley lives in Renton but took her kids to the summer meals program at the food bank in Issaquah. Other than that, what can she do? “Eat what you have,” she answered. But sometimes, there’s nothing to be had. She added, “A lot of cereal or sandwiches. I make sure my kids eat, but I go without.”



To those in the group who spoke about the stigma of asking for food assistance, Jenny replied, “I felt the same kind of shame, but your resources are provided for you. Other people can help you with food so then you can use other resources for medical supplies or things the food bank can’t help you with. That helps me get by.”

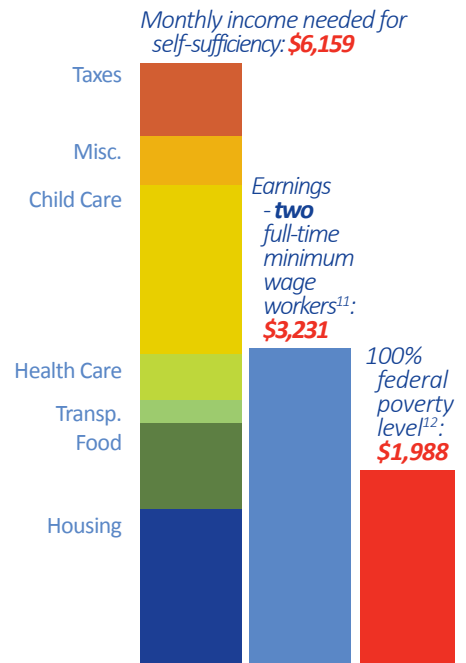
Jenny’s advice to her elected representatives is to look at the big

picture rather than focusing on funding or cutting individual programs. “There should be a whole person, whole family perspective. If you’re taking care of the people in the community, you’re taking care of the community.”

KING COUNTY:

Unemployment (Aug. 2014) ⁵	4.9%
Social Security recipients (2013) ⁶	23% (274,195)
Schoolchildren eligible for subsidized meals (Oct. 2014, Issaquah School District) ⁷	9% (1,764)
WIC recipients (2013) ⁸	3.4% (65,699)
Total served, June 2014:	
▪ Basic Food (SNAP) ^{9a}	234,139
▪ Medical assistance ^{9b}	121,840
▪ TANF cash assistance ^{9c}	18,707

Monthly income needed for self-sufficiency¹⁰: **\$6,159**



Left bar of graph shows income for a family of four to meet basic needs in King county.

FRANKLIN COUNTY



Population: Pasco—67,599²;
Franklin County—86,683³

Pasco

Barriers to food security:

- Lack of affordable housing; long waitlists for housing vouchers
- Lack of affordable transportation
- Cost of medical care on a fixed income

The food bank of St. Vincent de Paul in Pasco is a brand new facility, designed to make shopping there a welcoming experience. People spoke of how central the food bank is to their survival in this city where the costs of housing, transportation and utilities leave little in a household

budget for food.

“We can buy less expensive food, can combine that with what we get from the food bank and it’s healthier,” said Bernarda, a native of Mexico who has lived in Pasco for seven years.

The group had a lot of advice on finding deals at local grocery stores, but sometimes, the cost of transportation makes bargain hunting cost-prohibitive. “Gasoline—it costs a lot. Our car takes a lot of gas,” said Tammy who recently moved to Pasco from California with her partner Doug. “Sometimes we have to go to Albertsons because we don’t have the gas and we live close to it.” Participants preferred shopping at bargain stores like Winco and Fiesta Foods.

Having affordable, reliable transportation is also vital when others depend on you for a ride. Joan, who has lived in the Tri Cities for 15 years, added, “I have a sister that’s very ill, and I have a son that’s in dialysis that I take to the doctor. My car is on its last leg. What do you do?”

Housing is another essential need, but for Bonnie, a recent retiree, the cost of owning a home was pitted against the cost of having food to eat: “I worked full time until April, and now my husband and I are both on Social Security. That was a major



drop in our income. Consequently we had to sell our home. We just can’t do it all.”

Bonnie explained that her mortgage payment was half of her current income, but rental costs are also high. Trudy, a mother of a middle-school student, said, “About half my check goes straight into housing.” She added, “Just for me and my son, I was having to pay \$600 for a one bedroom. That wasn’t including my lights, and it’s pretty hard.”

Section 8 rental vouchers can help defray costs, but the waitlist is very long. Charles does car repairs and lawn jobs to supplement his unemployment benefits until he gets called back to work with a local heating and cooling business. He reported, “I’ve been on the waiting list—been on for eight months. They didn’t give me any hope at all. I have a friend who had to wait for a year.”

People felt that paying for power, heating and cooling is just as inflexible as paying for a home itself. “You’ve got to pay your electricity,” said Joan. “They’re not going to wait for their money. We’ve had two increases in the last year.”

“To me, they make you feel like you don’t deserve it—like ‘Go out and get a job!’ and sometimes that’s not possible. The whole world is looking for work. They’re very rude a lot of times. They need to have some compassion for the underdog.”



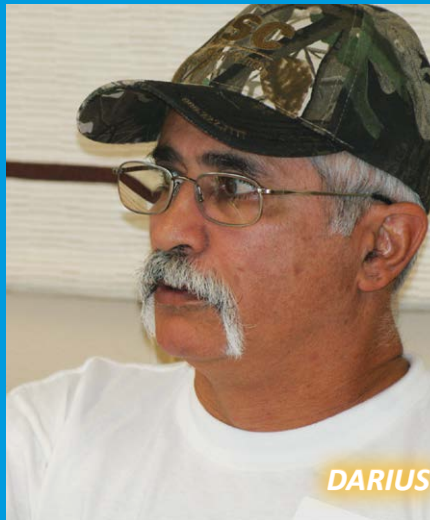
Darius moved from California to Pasco in 2006. He lives with his wife and 19-year-old son. Darius supports his family with disability income from Social Security. "I only get Social Security once a month, and I just got it and I'm already broke because of all my bills," he said. "I'm thankful for this food bank."

Darius has a heavily restricted diet for health reasons. He explained, "Well, since I had cancer and they took out my stomach, I can only eat certain things. The stuff that I have to try to get is more expensive so it's hard for me."

With a limited income and high food prices, Darius relies on both the food bank and food stamps to piece together meals, but on Nov. 1, 2013, the purchasing power of food stamps took a hit when a temporary economic stimulus ended, cutting monthly benefits.

In Darius's household of three adults, their monthly benefits were cut by \$60. When asked how his household has coped with the cut, he responded, "Sometimes I just don't eat so my wife and son can."

Darius joined the rest of the participants in this focus group who unanimously call on their elected representatives to protect food assistance: "Don't cut food stamps and the food bank so at least we get to eat sometimes," he said. He added, "Or at least have some understanding. You're not the one dealing with that type of stress."



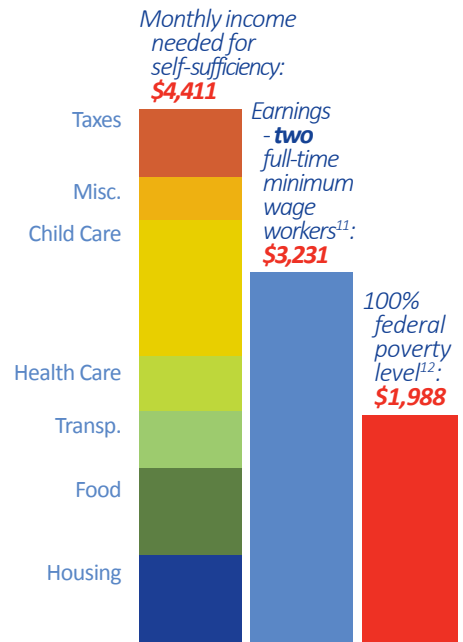
The food bank and food stamps form the main supports of a safety net when the costs of other basic needs are high and inflexible. Yet the safety net is fragile and frayed—cuts to programs can unravel it entirely. Tammy and Doug were homeless for 10 years before moving to Pasco where they have qualified for programs that have helped them rent a home, receive dental care, medical care, and food assistance.

At the time of this focus group, they were happy with how their lives have improved but were uncertain how they will find the money needed to pay an increase in rent due to the loss of a roommate. Protecting their food assistance could make all the difference in keeping a roof over their head. As Doug said, "The food bank and food stamps are keeping us alive. Don't cut any of it."

FRANKLIN COUNTY:

Unemployment (Aug. 2014) ⁵	5.8%
Social Security recipients (2013) ⁶	12% (9,130)
Schoolchildren eligible for subsidized meals (Oct. 2014, Pasco School District) ⁷	70% (13,353)
WIC recipients (2013) ⁸	13.2% (10,300)
Total served, June 2014:	
▪ Basic Food (SNAP) ^{9a}	18,524
▪ Medical assistance ^{9b}	8,577
▪ TANF cash assistance ^{9c}	1,298

Monthly income needed for self-sufficiency¹⁰: **\$4,411**



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

JEFFERSON COUNTY



Population: Port Townsend—9,210²;
Jefferson County—30,076³

Port Townsend

Barriers to food security:

- High cost of living
- Lack of living wage jobs
- Cuts to food stamps make nutritious food unaffordable

Tourists are drawn to Port Townsend and its seaside dining, its state park, and rows of colorful Victorian houses. Unfortunately towns can both thrive on tourism and be hurt by the impact that tourism has on prices for housing and food.

“There’s no choice here in Port Townsend,” said Caren, a grandmother who started

using the food bank for the first time when she retired and could no longer make ends meet. “Everything is sky high. I can’t afford anything at those stores.”

“If I shopped mostly at grocery stores, I would not be able to live here in Port Townsend,” added Jane, whose favorite food is a stir-fry of red pepper and green beans that her 10-year-old granddaughter made for her. “I shop mostly here at the food bank.”

Others echoed Jane and said they supplement what they find at the food bank with what they can afford to buy at stores. This is a problem because emergency food is meant to be supplemental and not the mainstay for feeding families.

Too many have little choice in the matter: food costs are high and cuts to food stamps have made monthly benefits inadequate. Gino, a military veteran who put his savings into buying a truck to run his own transit business, stated, “I get \$15 on food stamps. I usually use that for three boxes of cereal. I get the rest of what I need from here [the food bank].”

Gino further explained that what he gets from the food bank lasts for about a week “unless my kids come over” and “if you stretch it out.”

It’s hard to imagine that it is possible to meet one’s nutritional needs on three boxes of cereal and emergency food. Many of those in the group talked of the need and desire to eat healthy food but said that high costs and too little income are insurmountable barriers. Doug, another military veteran who receives Social Security Disability Income, told us how he gave up his food stamps because the \$10 he received after cuts required completion of a mountain of paperwork that ultimately was not worth the stress it triggered because of his Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Doug said, “It’s a choice. People talk about good quality food. Do I want to pay my phone bill, my rent or do I want to pay for food?”

No one should have to choose between necessities, but we heard from constituents who make these tough decisions every day. Mike came to Port Townsend to work for a bed and breakfast. When the hotel’s owner retired and sold the business in 2010, Mike lost his job and has been looking for steady employment ever since. His wife’s hours were cut at work and the two are trying to support two daughters in college. Recently Mike had to make a choice about whether he could afford medical care: “I broke a leg and went to the doctor two weeks later because I couldn’t afford to see him. The only thing you can do at that point is if you can get the doctor in the emergency room to agree to charity, then they can break it and reset it.”

Sometimes the painful choice is to swallow your pride and admit you just can’t pay your bills. Alysia, a mother of three, said, “I call bill people, tell them the truth, I can’t afford this. I’ve never had problems paying in the past. I’ll pay you \$25 to keep the service on. Right now things are hard,



“They keep cutting down my food stamps. I get less than \$200 for a family of 4. What can you do with that? Nothing, it’s horrible.”

Megan, Alysia, and Sandy are mothers struggling to provide healthy food for their children. Programs such as Women, Infant, and Children (WIC) food packages, food stamps, and school meals help their children have the nutritious food they need to learn in school and thrive.

Megan lives with her infant son and her boyfriend Alan. Alan has had difficulty finding work: "I work with cars or computer systems—not a lot of that in this area." Megan works in the restaurant industry, but the wages she earns are not enough to fully support her little family. She shops at the food bank, but food stamps expand her shopping options to include locally sourced food. "I go to the farmer's market weekly," she said. "You can use food stamps there now and get extra. I'm getting a lot of fresh vegetables and even meat."

Megan also praised the added support that her family gets from the WIC program. "WIC checks help a lot with milk and cereal for a month. We get six gallons of milk, at \$5 a gallon, so it helps a lot."

For Alysia, school meals help her save the money needed to provide meals outside of the school day. She said, "They have to [eat school breakfast] or else they'll starve." She also expressed gratitude for the vouchers that WIC provides her to spend at the farmer's market on fresh produce.

Sandy has two children with special needs. A healthy diet is key to helping curb behavioral outbursts. If school meals do not have the nutritious food that a behavioral therapist has prescribed for her children's diets, Sandy has the added expense of making their lunches when they otherwise qualify for a free meal. She suggested, "It'd be nice if community garden programs could also get into schools as well. Use fresh and local in meals there."



you're just going to have to deal with it."

Many expressed frustration with the lack of jobs in the area. Mike said, "The Washington Unemployment website lists the jobs available in each county. Jefferson County has 52 jobs available. Port Angeles has 140 jobs listed. Pierce County has 160 jobs listed. There's

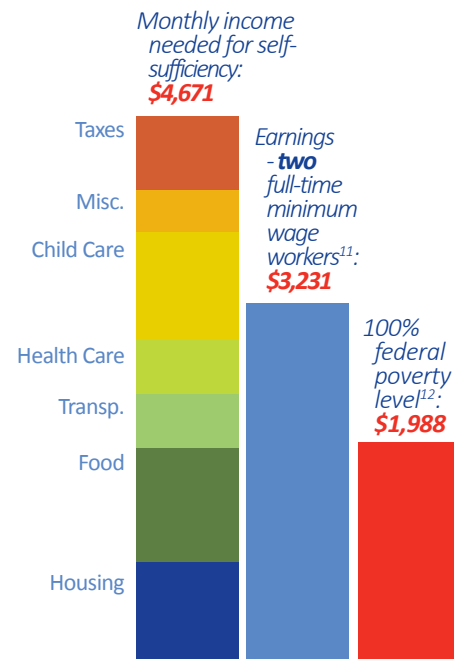
just no jobs in Jefferson County."

Without jobs, participants asked for preservation of the safety net services that keep them whole. Caren asked for the prevention of cuts to "food and medical. Medical keeps getting higher and higher. We're all going to need dental, especially once you retire."

JEFFERSON COUNTY:

Unemployment (Aug. 2014) ⁵	6.5%
Social Security recipients (2013) ⁶	36% (10,880)
Schoolchildren eligible for subsidized meals (Oct. 2014, Port Townsend School District) ⁷	45% (578)
WIC recipients (2013) ⁸	2.9% (863)
Total served, June 2014:	
▪ Basic Food (SNAP) ^{9a}	4,232
▪ Medical assistance ^{9b}	2,022
▪ TANF cash assistance ^{9c}	269

Monthly income needed for self-sufficiency¹⁰: **\$4,671**



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

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS



Painful Choices

Focus group participants live their lives facing one painful choice after another. With limited resources, they must decide which necessities they will forego in order to pay for other basic needs. Food gets pitted against health care; rent is paid in lieu of heat during winter months; a broken car will sit unused in a driveway despite the need for transportation to work in order to have enough money to pay for a child's school lunch.

No one should have to choose between necessities. Government programs and services help keep families whole during temporary times of economic crisis. The decisions made in Olympia and in Washington, D.C. have a direct impact on whether there are resources to help

low-income families meet their basic needs until they are back on their feet. That is why these constituents urged their elected representatives to make a concerted effort to understand how decisions to cut safety net services hurt the low income families they represent.

"Get the legislature a mid-range or low-range apartment with a \$1,000 car, live on income from Social Security, and get food from the food bank. Give them an imaginary disease, have the doctor order a test that is not allowed, or go to DSHS and wait 30 days to clear," said Mike from Port Townsend. "Try living off the available systems and then think about it. Walk a half mile to the food bank and back, then think about what they cut."

In the years since the recession, our state legislature has been remarkable for its bipartisan efforts to protect and restore some food and nutrition assistance programs, and the results have proved that the safety net works. Although Washington was one of three states where poverty increased¹³, the rate of hunger here declined slightly¹⁴. It is clear that the people in our focus group, who represent so many others using food banks, need and rely on every resource for which they are eligible. These programs weave together to provide a circle of protection around food insecure Washingtonians, staving off hunger. Pulling a thread by

cutting even one program threatens to unravel the whole system.

Expertise and Experience Informs Recommendations

Northwest Harvest is committed to protecting hungry families in need: we provide nutritious food to relieve the immediate pangs of hunger while working on long-term solutions to hunger. Addressing food insecurity is our area of expertise, and we know that nutrition programs are both critical and impactful, which is why we advocate for the following public policies that lift families out of poverty and strengthen the important food safety net.

1. Restore and strengthen SNAP benefits

We support efforts to restore and strengthen SNAP benefits, beginning with H.R. 2384. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is our first line of defense against hunger: it feeds hungry, low-income people while generating economic activity in our communities because it is spent on food at grocery stores, farmers markets, and community vendors. For every \$5 of SNAP benefits spent, \$9 of economic activity is generated.¹⁵

SNAP remains a target for deep cuts even though spending was cut by \$5

billion in November 2013. That cut resulted in an estimated loss of more than 47 million meals in Washington state over the past year.¹⁶ Fragile and stressed food banks—meant to be an emergency resource and not an ongoing food supply—have become the normal recourse for more and more people.

A good first step is support for H.R. 2384, a bill in Congress that would change the basis for SNAP allotments from the USDA’s Thrifty Food Plan to the less meagre Low Cost Food Plan. Changing to the Low Cost Food Plan would increase the health and well-being of millions of Americans who would have more adequate SNAP benefits, thus increasing access to nutritious food.

2. Restore the State Food Assistance Program

Restore full funding to the State Food Assistance program (SFA). This program ensures that our newest neighbors—legally residing immigrants in Washington—have the support they need to feed their families through tough economic times. SFA beneficiaries receive only 75% of what SNAP recipients receive, and their benefits are cut when SNAP benefits are reduced. A partial restoration of benefits in 2012 was nearly wiped out by the November 2013 cuts to SNAP and SFA benefits. SFA impacts nearly 15,000 children in Washington.¹⁷

3. Maintain funding for food banks and farmers markets

The Legislature should maintain funds added to the Emergency Food Assistance Program (EFAP) in 2014. Our state provides much needed support to food banks through EFAP. In this time of economic recovery, food banks continue to serve record numbers of people—an even higher number than during the worst of the recession. Cuts to government assistance programs only exacerbate the need. Funds added last year help food banks purchase additional food and provide for the safe storage and distribution of food to our neighbors in need.

Our state should also protect the Farmers Market Nutrition Program for families on WIC and for low-income seniors. Increasing the affordability and accessibility to nutritious food is vital to low-income people. The funding added in the 2014 budget went directly to providing more vouchers for buying produce from Washington’s small growers at farmers markets across the state, expanding this resource to more participants and supporting local farmers at the same time.

4. Ensure children have access to nutritious food

- Protect healthier school meal standards in the Child Nutrition Act



- Support programs to end summer hunger
- Require Washington’s high-need schools to provide breakfast after the bell

In 2015, Congress will address the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act (CNR). This legislation authorizes the spending for child nutrition programs that provide summer meals, school meals, after school meals, and Women, Infants and Children (WIC) food packages. Congress should pass a CNR that increases access and participation in these programs, reduces barriers for service providers, and protects the school meal standards that ensure that low-income children have healthy school meals.

Pass the Summer Meals Act, legislation that has bipartisan support in both the

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS *(CONT.)*

House and the Senate. The act provides transportation grants to service providers, streamlines the administration of child meal programs by allowing funding for summer meals to be used year round, and lowers the area eligibility requirement to enable more communities to feed the hungry children in their neighborhoods.

Ensure that all hungry children don't skip lunch while school is closed by expanding a program that provides \$150 on an Electronic Benefit Transfer card (EBT) to every child who is eligible for a free or reduced price school lunch. A pilot study of the Summer EBT Program showed a 33% reduction in very low food security.¹⁸

Congress should appropriate funds that are sufficient to strengthen and protect these programs. Hungry people cannot afford to have child nutrition programs paid for by cuts to other nutrition programs such as SNAP. This will only result in a net loss of support for hungry children and will not yield the improved outcomes sought by strengthening child nutrition programs.

At the state level, we support requiring certain high-need schools to provide breakfast after the bell. Making breakfast a part of the school day has resulted in significant improvement in participation rates in New Mexico, Colorado, and Washington, D.C. and as a direct result, students in those schools have shown remarkable improvements in attendance, reading level performance and behavior,

according to a study conducted by Washington Appleseed.¹⁹ Washington state currently ranks 41st in the nation in school breakfast participation.²⁰ We must break down barriers to participation in order to ensure that children have the fuel they need to focus on learning and succeed in school.

Address the Core Causes of Poverty and Hunger

- Create living wage jobs
- Restore TANF
- Oppose cuts to support services

With decades of experience and expertise in working in hunger relief, Northwest Harvest knows that hunger is a symptom of the larger issue of poverty. Therefore, we advocate more broadly for policies and sustainable measures that attack the underlying causes of poverty to provide a sustainable solution to hunger in our communities.

We support increased job creation that pays living wages. The statewide unemployment rate hovers between 5-6%, yet we still see an increased need for emergency food services. This suggests that despite finding employment, food bank participants are not finding jobs that pay sufficient wages.

We support restoring the 15% cut to the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) and protecting programs that provide housing and essential needs for people with

disabilities who are unable to work.

We support a balanced approach to budgeting and oppose budgets that cut services for basic needs. A constitutional mandate for quality education for all Washington children, a voter-approved ballot initiative that mandates smaller class sizes, and providing basic needs services to current caseloads cannot be met solely by cutting programs that help low-income families meet their basic needs.

Join Us!

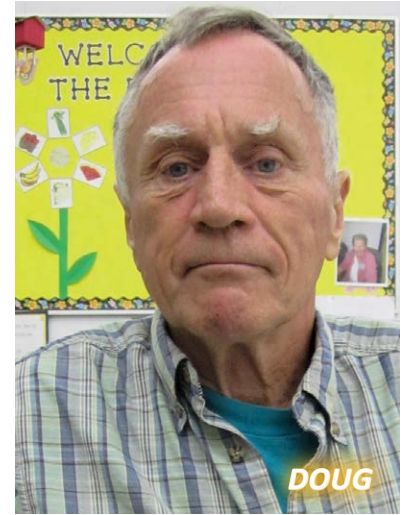
Northwest Harvest is committed to ending hunger in Washington. We work toward this goal directly by freely providing nutritious food to hungry people throughout our state, supporting the infrastructure of the hunger response system, and by advocating for strategic investments of public funds and the strengthening of key policies that provide food and other resources to low-income people. We stand collectively with the voices heard throughout our focus groups and with other organizations that support a healthy safety net to ensure all Washington citizens have what they need to survive. We hope you will make the choice of joining us in our work.

PROCESS AND POVERTY MEASURES



“To me, they make you feel like you don’t deserve it—like ‘Go out and get a job!’ and sometimes that’s not possible. The whole world is looking for work. They’re very rude a lot of times. They need to have some compassion for the underdog.”

—Joan



Process

Focus groups were held in 2014 at five locations across Washington, representing rural, urban, and suburban areas in Lincoln, Douglas, King, Franklin and Jefferson counties.

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 Standard¹⁰ 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. 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 poverty¹² 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

PROCESS AND POVERTY MEASURES *(CONT.)*



childcare taking a significantly larger share of a household budget.

In 2010, the U.S. Census Bureau released the **Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM)**²¹ 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. This SPM measure found 49.7 million poor people in 2012 in the U.S., or 3.1 million more than 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. 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 Wage²¹ 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 the highest state minimum wage in the nation at \$9.32 per hour for 2014, some may think that level of pay would be adequate to

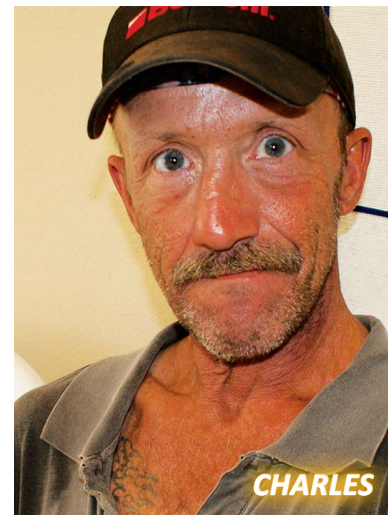
sustain a household. The graph shows that even with two people working full-time at minimum wage of \$9.19 in 2013, they fell short of meeting self-sufficiency standard in that county.

ANNOTATED REFERENCES



“Unemployment doesn’t cover even close to my bills and stuff so I have to go out there and get to work, find something else till I get called back to work hopefully soon. It helps to pay the bills, pay the power.”

—Charles



¹ Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. <http://www.cbpp.org/cms/?fa=view&id=3899>

² City populations (2013 estimate): <http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=bkmk>

³ County populations (2013 estimate): <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/53000.html>

⁴ Parenthelp 123 Resource Finder. <https://resources.parenthelp123.org/services/summer-meals>

⁵ Unemployment Information: United States Dept of Labor; Bureau of Labor Statistics <http://data.bls.gov/map/MapToolServlet>

⁶ OASDI Beneficiaries by State and County, 2013. http://www.ssa.gov/policy/docs/statcomps/oasdi_sc/

⁷ State of Washington, Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, Child Nutrition Services. Free and Reduced-Price Meals Eligibility. October 2014 Count. (Data obtained pre-publication, subject to change)

⁸ WIC: <http://www.doh.wa.gov/DataandStatisticalReports/HealthBehaviors/WIC.aspx>

⁹ ESA Briefing Book, June 2014. <http://www.dshs.wa.gov/esa/manuals/briefing-book>

¹⁰ The Self-Sufficiency Standard: <http://www.selfsufficiencystandard.org/docs/Washington2014.pdf>

¹¹ Minimum Wage: <http://www.dol.gov/whd/minimumwage.htm>

¹² Federal Poverty Level: <http://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty/14computations.cfm>

¹³ *Income and Poverty in the United States: 2013*, US Census Bureau. <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2014/demo/p60-249.pdf>

¹⁴ *Household Food Security in the United States in 2013*, United States Department of Agriculture. <http://www.ers.usda.gov/media/1565415/err173.pdf>

¹⁵ *The Food Assistance National Input-Output Multiplier (FANIOM) Model and Stimulus Effects of SNAP*, USDA Economic Research Services. http://www.ers.usda.gov/media/134117/err103_1_.pdf

¹⁶ *Annual Meals Lost by State* (Analysis by Feeding America.) <http://hungercliff.org/resources/>

¹⁷ Children’s Alliance, Seattle, WA.

¹⁸ *Summer Electronic Benefits Transfer for Children (SEBTC) Demonstration: 2013 Final Report*, USDA Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Policy Support. <http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/ops/sebtc2013.pdf>

¹⁹ *The Future of School Breakfast*, Washington Appleseed. <https://schoolbreakfastwa.files.wordpress.com/2014/09/breakfast-after-the-bell-1.pdf>

²⁰ *School Breakfast Scorecard: 2012-2013 School Year*, Food Research Action Center. http://frac.org/pdf/School_Breakfast_Scorecard_SY_2012_2013.pdf

²¹ *Measuring America: How Census Measures Poverty*. http://www.census.gov/library/infographics/poverty_measure-how.html



Northwest Harvest
P.O. Box 12272
Seattle, WA 98102
northwestharvest.org
800.722.6924