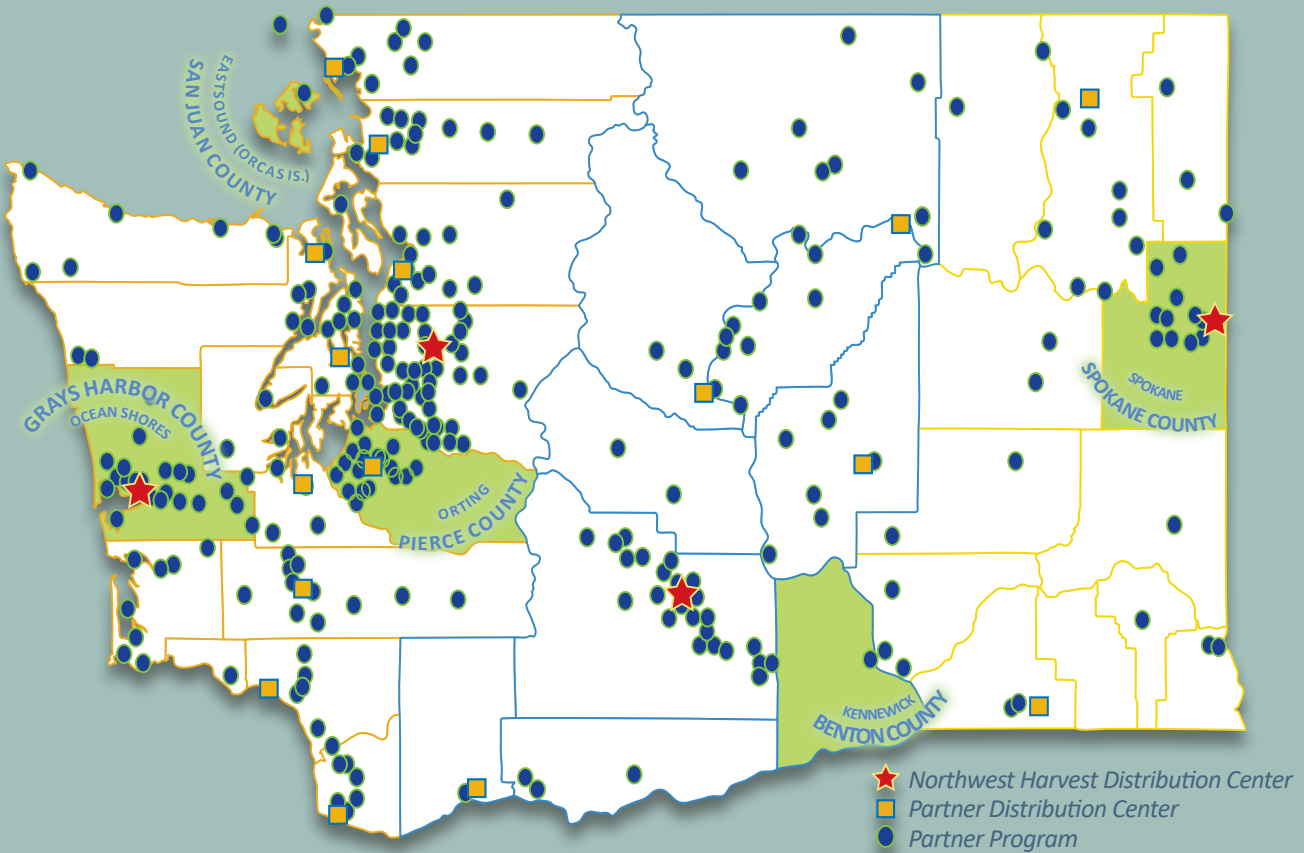


Focus on Food Security: *The Stress of Poverty and Toll on Health*

Northwest Harvest's Focus Group Report 2019

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



NORTHWEST HARVEST

Northwest Harvest is Washington's leading hunger relief agency – supporting a statewide network of 375 food banks, meal programs, and high-need schools. Focused on improving our food system, Northwest Harvest believes everyone in Washington should have equitable access to nutritious food that nourishes the body, mind, and spirit. In addition to making sure those who suffer from hunger are being fed, Northwest Harvest aims to shift public opinion, as well as impact institutional policies and societal practices that perpetuate hunger, poverty, and disparities in our state.

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Focus on Food Security 2019: The Stress of Poverty and Toll on Health

For 12 years, Northwest Harvest has published our annual Focus on Food Security report, detailing real life stories of individuals who struggle with hunger and poverty throughout our state. Every year we are humbled by the generosity of our focus group participants who open up their lives, answering our questions about barriers to accessing nutritious food, health care, housing, transportation, and other essential needs. Every year we are inspired by their strength in the face of adversity, their adaptations and hard work to survive and find stability.

For this project, we visit with five different food banks from our statewide network of 375 food pantries, meal programs, and high need schools. This year, we conducted focus groups in Orcas Island, Kennewick, Ocean Shores, Spokane, and Orting.

With deep appreciation for the hard work that they do every day on the frontlines of hunger, we would also like to thank the following people for their partnership in helping us conduct these focus

groups: Leon Brauner (Ocean Shores Food Bank), Robin Hash (Orting Food Bank), Bill Kitchen (Tri Cities Food Bank Kennewick), Susan McBain (Orcas Island Food Bank), and Barb Olson (Northeast Food Pantry). We also thank the staff and volunteers at these food banks providing space to accommodate our focus groups.

We are especially grateful to the 68 individuals who participated in our focus groups. You not only shared personal experiences and reflections, but you gave us important feedback and thoughtful suggestions for how we can work together to make programs, public policies, and public investments be more responsive to your needs. We look forward to continuing to work with you, as together, we mobilize a movement across our state for a more equitable food system.

**THOMAS REYNOLDS,
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER**



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Access previous years' reports at:

northwestharvest.org/Focus-on-Food-Security

INTRODUCTION



At Northwest Harvest, we believe that nutritious food can be the catalyst to help struggling families and individuals achieve stability. We see hunger persist in households where meals are skipped in order to pay the rent, utilities, health care, and other essentials. But every missed meal damages health and increases feelings of distress that can distract from the ability to focus on school or work. If every person at risk of hunger had consistent access to nutritious food, our communities would be healthier and stronger. All of us would be better off.

Yet here in Washington and nationally, we are missing the mark, as far too many people don't know where their next meal will come from:

- 1 in 9 Washingtonians struggle to put food on their tables. ¹
- 1 in 6 Washington children don't know when they will next eat. ²
- If you are African-American or Hispanic, you are more than twice as likely to struggle with hunger than white households. ³
- Rural communities struggle with hunger at disproportionately higher rates than metropolitan areas. ¹

This is why Northwest Harvest has launched a new strategic initiative to create more equitable access to nutritious food for all in Washington. Our *Focus on Food Security* report, now in its 12th year of production, provides us a bird's eye view of hunger in a sample of communities in our state, deepening our understanding of who goes hungry and why so that we can work with the private and public sectors to break down the barriers to nutritious food.

Our focus groups took place in tourist communities like Orcas Island and Ocean Shores. We also traveled to agriculturally-rich Kennewick, the small town of Orting, and the metropolitan area of Spokane. In these communities, we gathered stories from people who are trying their hardest but are still struggling to get by. We met seniors who worked for decades but lost their retirement savings during the Great Recession and struggle to keep up with rising costs of living on a fixed income provided by Social Security. We met individuals for whom luck took a turn for the worse, leaving them with disabling conditions so that they struggle to pay the bills and feed their families. But more so this year than in the previous years since the end of the recession, we encountered individuals who are working

or have at least one working household member, but their wages are too low to meet all of their basic, household needs.

"I've tried to get food stamps, but by the time I've paid my rent, my utilities, my water bill, everything—I try to get food, but I have nothing left. I've been told I still make \$50 too much for food stamps," said Karen from our Orcas Island focus group. Karen, like so many people who work low-wage jobs, falls into a food gap—the gap that's created when you make too much to be income eligible for food stamps but can't afford to buy food after paying for other essential needs.

In our state that is rich with agriculture and at the forefront of technology and philanthropy, it is completely unacceptable that hunger still exists. Hunger is a punishment that not one of these individuals has earned: it's the cards that they have been dealt despite years of hard work and struggles to build a foundation back to stability. We hope that these stories foster a better understanding of why people are hungry, the need for a system of programs and services to help them get back on their feet, and inspire action to join us in the movement to ensure every Washingtonian's basic right to nutritious food.

SAN JUAN COUNTY



Population³: San Juan County—15,769

Eastsound (Orcas Island)

Orcas Island is the largest of the San Juan Islands. The island is nearly split in half by an inlet that shares the same name as its most populated village: Eastsound. This village is a hub of activity for tourists.

Tourism generates economic activity on the island, but it also poses significant challenges for residents who struggle to keep up with the high cost of living. Tom has lived in a boat for the last two years after losing the struggle to keep pace with housing costs driven up by short-term vacation rentals. “My last long-term rental situation was about 700 square feet. I paid \$1300 for rent alone, had to do the upkeep, and utilities were \$300/month,” he said. “I spent 60-80% of my income just to keep a roof over my head, until finally, my landlords kicked me out via a text,



because they could make \$500/night during the summer time.”

Six out of 15 of our focus group participants reported they were now living in places with no electricity or running water because they were priced out of housing. Unfortunately, the situation will likely get worse as the demand for vacation rentals continues to grow. Jean moved to the island from Seattle to start a food co-op. “When I first moved here, tourism was Memorial Day to Labor Day, and then they were gone,” she said. “Now it runs Valentine’s Day through Thanksgiving.”

Participants called on lawmakers to help by providing more affordable housing options: “Increase the housing, not just to purchase but for people to rent,” said Mike, whose parents first came to the island in 1939. “I’m a designer/builder. I would like to think I can come up with a better solution than apartments—some kind of shared environment—the county needs to change zoning requirements.”

Living out of a tent poses significant barriers to eating a healthy diet, because there’s no capacity to store or prepare food. Eagle recently moved to Orcas Island from the Hoopa Reservation in Northern California. “I’ve lost over 15 pounds since I’ve been here for three weeks,” he stated. “I can’t get fresh fruits or vegetables, or it’ll go bad.”

The cost of food is also too high. “Literally everything in the market is doubled from where I used to live,” reported Lynn, who relocated to the island from southern Utah on the promise of seasonal work at a local farm. “When I shop, I don’t buy meat—it’s not affordable,” added Marlia, who has lived

in senior housing for nearly 14 years. She added, “It’s wonderful that the food bank has tuna fish, because you look at the prices and even at \$1.03 per little can, it doesn’t really fit in my budget.”

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP or “food stamps”), helps make food more affordable, but for many of these participants, living on the island poses significant barriers to applying for the program. One barrier is that there is no physical location to fill out paperwork. Jean reported that a mobile services van comes to the island once every three months, “otherwise it’s a \$50 plus gas trip to the mainland.”

“I was a dad supporting four kids. My bills were \$500/week for just basic food. What would we do without our food stamps? We’d starve.”

—Steven

“The paperwork alone to get food stamps will drive you crazy,” said George, who grew up in Mount Baker and loves a good chuck roast.

Specifically, applying for food stamps requires showing documentation of costs for basic needs including health care and utilities to prove income eligibility. Jean said, “For somebody who’s elderly and has a short-term memory problem, just keeping track of receipts for a whole year to turn them in for your food stamps is just impossible.”

“In my case, I basically live in a glorified tent,” added Jessie, whose kind eyes twinkle when he speaks of his love for a good stilton cheese. “I no longer have space for file cabinets to

“I get \$15 per month in food stamps. What am I supposed to do with that? At the end of the month when I’m totally flat broke, maybe I can buy creamer for my coffee.”—Jennifer

keep records. The place I do paperwork is the place I eat.”

Losing track of receipts hurts SNAP applicants who miss out on benefits for which they are eligible. Programs that help increase the purchasing power of SNAP would help stretch their assistance further. Cyndi likes to work with her hands instead of at a desk job. She spoke highly of Fresh Bucks which provides matching dollars when SNAP is used at farmers markets: “In Bellingham, they double your EBT money on produce spent in certain places. That would be nice if they did that here—double the fruits and veggies.”

Another popular program that increases access to locally grown food is the Farmers Market Nutrition Program. “The only reason I can shop at the farmers market is because they send coupons,” said Jessie.

Participants also attend meals at the food bank and local churches. “In my world, it takes them all,” said Steven, a Brooklyn native. “The combination of the state, [the food bank], dinners—all of them. To support anybody here, not a single one of the programs is enough.”

“No program should be cut,” declared Lynn. “It seems they’re not doing enough as is.”

“Keep the food programs and work with the farmers more,” added Karen, who moved to the island from Kentucky. “They can get more food to those who need it and can make more money.”

We start off every focus group with an ice breaker question, asking our participants to tell us what their favorite food is. Karen shyly smiled as she told us that she likes “fruits and vegetables, but pretty much my favorite is oatmeal.”

Like others in our focus group, Karen struggles with affording basic costs of living on the island. “Expenses are so high—just housing costs alone. And gasoline and fuel are way higher around here.”

“I work,” she continued. “I have to take so much out of my paycheck to pay rent. After that, I pay water and electric. By the time that’s all done, I’ve got \$10.”

Karen then prioritizes transportation. “I’ve got to pay gas to get back and forth to work,” she said. “There’s no safety net. There’s nothing left.”

In other words, Karen’s sacrificing her health to keep a roof over her head and to get to work to keep her job. “I go without medical, without prescriptions,” she explained. “That’s not high on my priorities, but that’s doing damage to my body.”

Food prices are also too high. “We’re so limited. There’s no competitor to our grocery store, so consequently, we



Karen

are stuck with whatever they decide to do,” she said. “If you can’t afford to get it, you don’t get it that week. You can’t do anything about it.”

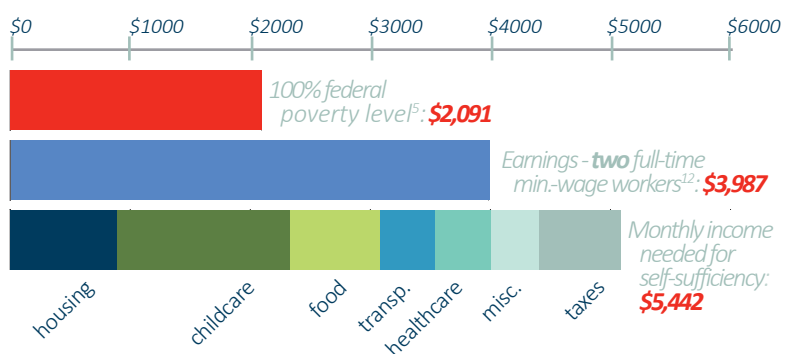
Karen is ineligible for food stamps but just barely so: her annual net income is just \$50 over the federal poverty line, which for her, living alone, is \$12,140.⁶ Already foregoing health care, Karen also sacrifices a balanced, nutritious diet. “I ate a lot of oatmeal because it’s cheap,” she confessed. “It became my favorite food. I couldn’t afford the produce: I couldn’t afford the vegetables; I couldn’t afford the fruits. I would look for the ones that were older or damaged or blemished, but it really affects what you’re able to do with your nutrition. There’s a lot of nights you’ve eaten oatmeal twice a day for the past several hundred days. You’re hungry.”

SAN JUAN COUNTY:

Unemployment (Aug. 2018) ⁵	2.9%
Social Security recipients (2018) ⁷	0.8% (130)
Schoolchildren eligible for subsidized meals (2018) ⁸ San Juan County	43.0% (893)
WIC recipients (2017) ⁹	2.1% (332)
Total served (2018)¹⁰:	
▪ Basic Food (SNAP)	912
▪ Medical assistance	3,373
▪ TANF cash assistance	16
▪ ABD program clients	18

Monthly income needed for self-sufficiency¹¹: **\$5,442**

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



BENTON COUNTY



Population³: Kennewick—73,917;
Benton County—198,171

Kennewick

Kennewick joins Richland and Pasco to make up the Tri-Cities at the confluence of the Snake, Columbia, and Yakima Rivers. Water from these rivers has made this area fertile grounds for vineyards, wheat fields, and orchards.

But what does this mean for job opportunities for residents? Full-time jobs that provide steady income year-round are needed in this community, but most of the available opportunities appear to be seasonal in nature. “There’s summer jobs, working at the farms, picking fruit or vegetables during the busiest time here,” said Michelle, who moved to Kennewick 13 years ago. “In the summertime, they hire more people, but then they lay you off closer to wintertime when they can’t afford to pay you anymore.”

Some participants in our focus group want to work, but their



Judith

disabilities are a barrier to finding a job. “I’d do anything to go to work,” said Jen, a 38-year-old wife and mother who had to stop working in 2012 after contracting a rare auto-immune disease. “I’m not allowed to go to work. How are you supposed to live? I want to work!”

Even though Jen cannot work, her husband has a job, but his earnings and her disability income combined are not enough. The family is income eligible for SNAP. “We have a large family—seven children,” she explained. “When my daughter turned 18, she went to work. They cut my EBT in half. They said she can earn for the family, but she’s trying to get out on her own.”

Daniel is also on disability and SNAP. He shares his home with fellow focus group participant, Michelle, his parents, his nephew, his daughter, and his son-in-law who were recently laid off from work. Their total SNAP benefit for the month is \$175. “It’s really hard to make ends meet,” he said. “We’re both forking cash out to keep our house.”

Another participant, Bertha, worked until she became disabled. Her disability benefits make her income eligible for SNAP, but she qualifies for the minimum benefit—just \$15 per month. This is Bertha’s only assistance for food despite having full-time care of her grandson.

It may not buy much, but enrollment in SNAP has its advantages: her grandson is directly certified for free school meals without additional paperwork. “My grandson gets free lunch at school which I am very thankful for,” stated Bertha. “With the food bank and the \$15 [SNAP benefit], I get what I don’t get from here to help supplement,” she added.

At some schools in the Richland School District, all students eat for free thanks to the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), which allows schools with a significant population of high poverty, high need students to provide more meals at the highest federal reimbursement rate. Students may receive meals, but they still need time to eat. Daniel said, “At Richland, they get half an hour for lunch, then they push them out.”

“I get \$840 in Disability. I can’t afford to go to the doctor. I’ve got a broken down house that needs repairs. Whatever’s left over—that’s my food for the month. I feel like I’m nobody any more. I worked 2-3 jobs; I supported kids, but now that I’m on welfare, they don’t care anymore.”

—Shelly

When eligible schools don’t utilize CEP, then low-income students who qualify for reduced price meals must pay a co-pay or run the risk of not eating. “My nephew is not allowed to get free lunch,” explained Michelle. “He goes hungry. They just let him go without. His friends usually buy it, but I don’t think that’s right to let a kid go hungry or embarrass them by making them wash the tables, so everyone knows this kid is too poor to eat food.”

Programs like SNAP and school meals help struggling families with food, but families still can’t afford other basic expenses without additional assistance. All our focus group participants had Medicaid or Medicare, but even with assistance, health

“I think it’s a lie that there’s a lack of food in this country. Whoever said that is not for the people. The system doesn’t encourage growing your own or eating healthy.”

care costs, inadequate coverage, and a lack of providers that accept their insurance were all barriers to health care.

“My copay was \$54,” said Shelly, who was injured on the job and has not been able to work since. “I said forget it—I can’t afford that.”

“It’s almost funny because Medicare will pay for your eye exam but nothing for the vision,” reported Diana, who occasionally gets ice chests of fresh seafood from her son who lives on the coast. “They will tell you if you have glaucoma but won’t pay for the exam to see if you need new glasses.”

Many participants have neglected dental needs because they can’t find a provider who takes their insurance. “No one wants to hire you if you have no teeth,” said Michelle. “They’ll think you’re a drug addict.”

Emergencies still come up, and bills will need to be paid but with what resources? “I go to families, friends, but they’re other people going through something too,” said Michelle. “You sell your things to get what you need,” she continued. “I make cupcakes to make ends meet. I will buy \$1 cake mix to make them.”

“A lot of people are having problems,” stated Daniel. “They can’t get medical, can’t get cash assistance. That’s why we have a lot of homeless. It’s wrong.”

“It’s so black and white,” added Jen. “There’s no in between. I

“The food bank is a new experience for me,” said Lynda, as she introduced herself to our focus group. “I’ve done grant writing. I have a degree. I’ve done a lot of case management. I used to bring clients to places like this.”

Lynda uses the food bank now that she can no longer work. “I was in a motorcycle accident, and my arm was severed,” she explained. Her arm was reattached, but she has limited range of movement. “I can’t do anything,” she said. “It’s hard. I want to—my brain wants to.”

Lynda’s fiancé has a job, but the couple finds themselves in a food gap. “My fiancé makes that much too much for any benefits,” she said, while holding her index finger and thumb about an inch apart.

Without assistance, the couple can’t afford the prices for more nutritious food. “When we both worked, we could afford the healthier stuff, but now, for \$5, we could get a greasy burger and fries from Dairy Queen,” she said.

The food budget is tight so that she can prioritize having a safe place to live. “I pay \$1,000 for a 3-bedroom,” she explained. “I’ve lost so much in my life in the last eight months—that’s one thing I won’t skimp on. I



won’t skimp on where I live.”

Lynda also pays out-of-pocket for the over-the-counter medications she prefers to use to manage her pain. “My surgeon took me off pain meds right away and gave me Aleve and Ibuprofen,” she stated. “My health insurance will pay for opiates, but it’s in my best interest that I didn’t want to be on any of that. We found a happy medium, but it gets expensive.”

Lynda urges her lawmakers to expand benefits and basic needs resources, because luck can turn your finances upside down. “I was a have, then I was a have not,” she said. “What I remember middle class being is not what it is anymore. We pay taxes, we live the right way, but even with my fiancé working a really good job, we’re still below poverty. In a blink of an eye life changes. There’s no grey.”

didn’t wake one day and think I should get sick and never work again. You get put in this

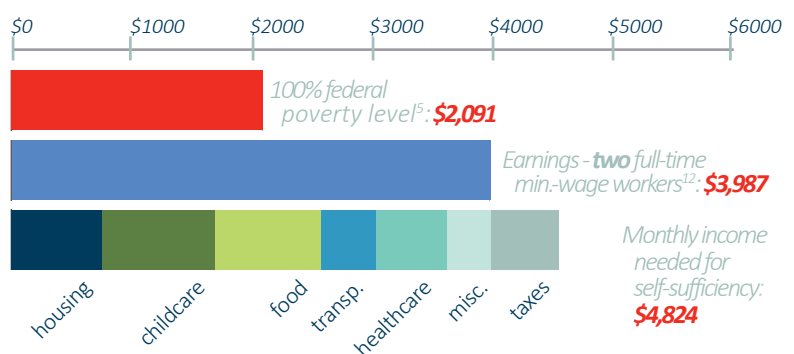
category like you’re a piece of crap and worthless. There needs to be an in-between.”

BENTON COUNTY:

Unemployment (Aug. 2018) ⁶	6.0%
Social Security recipients (2018) ⁷	3.2% (674)
Schoolchildren eligible for subsidized meals (2018) ⁸ <i>Benton County</i>	59.4% (1,038)
WIC recipients (2017) ⁹	3.9% (823)
Total served (2018)¹⁰:	
▪ Basic Food (SNAP)	4,220
▪ Medical assistance	6,871
▪ TANF cash assistance	286
▪ ABD program clients	79

Monthly income needed for self-sufficiency¹¹: **\$4,824**

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



SPOKANE COUNTY



Population³:

Spokane—208,916; Spokane County—471,221

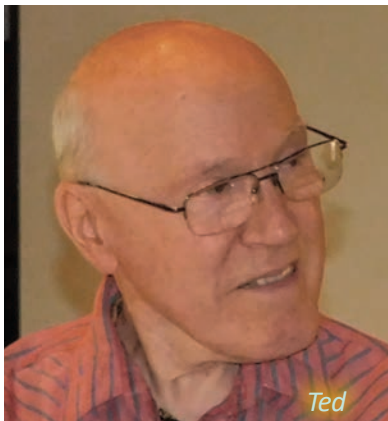
Spokane

The Hillyard neighborhood is one of the lowest income per capita areas in Spokane and in the state.¹³ As a result, housing remains relatively affordable compared to other parts of the city, making the neighborhood attractive to immigrants, college students, and others with limited incomes.

“You see more houses turned into apartments for smaller families and less places for bigger families,” explained Serenity, who works part-time and has been looking for a new home for her family of four. She found a house that was recently redone as a one-bedroom apartment, offered at \$895. “That place’s overpriced for what [they’re] truly offering,” she said.

“They’re accommodating for the fluctuation of college students, but the cost is to families.”

“Housing is the best part of my



situation,” said Erika, who worked until she became disabled. She bought her home 12 years ago with no down payment. “It’s near the bus line to go to the food bank, Walmart, and I take the 26 downtown.”

“I live in the home, and that’s why I get only \$15 in food stamps,” she added. Erika, like many individuals living on a fixed income provided by Social Security, is income eligible for SNAP, but owning her home contains her housing costs, resulting in a net income that is too high for anything but the minimum SNAP benefit.

“It’s not worth it to me,” said Tina whose painful back injuries have prevented her from working since she was 24. “Now everything is done online or going down to the office which is not always a nice place,” she continued. “You can’t see my disability, but I don’t like being treated like I’m expected to rise up above. I’ve had three failed back surgeries. I would rather be working than not.”

Tina relies on the food bank but is still left with gaps since neither her minimum SNAP benefit nor the food bank provide enough. “I get noodles, but I don’t have butter, or I don’t have a sauce,” she said. “I hate to complain, but it’s not a complete meal.”

For our participants who are raising children, child nutrition programs also help supplement SNAP, adding more nutritious meals to the household. “I really like WIC; it’s a good program,” said Lou who immigrated here with her family 19 years ago. “They allow you to get yogurt and some different types of whole grains. My kids get excited when we get WIC.”

“Also the farmers market vouchers,” added her sister, Natalya. “Fresh fruits and

vegetables you can get for free? I really like that.”

However, WIC still has its limitations. Lou worries that her household will face a sudden drop in nutritious food when her child ages out of the program. “We get WIC for six more months, but then my kid will be 5,” said Lou. “It’s not like she won’t be hungry!”

The school meal programs are intended to be a reliable source of nutritious food for school-aged children, but parents in our focus group had concerns that their children were still going hungry. “Most schools are giving fruits, cereal,” said Natalya, opting to feed her children at home when they could get free school breakfast. “I like to give them oatmeal, something more satisfying and nutritious.”

“I’m on a limited income. If I didn’t have food stamps, then I would only have \$40 to spend on groceries per month.”

—Diane

“When I’m hungry, I don’t focus. I only think about why my stomach is touching my spine,” said Serenity, describing her worries when her athletic teenagers call her from school, asking her for more food after gym class and sports. “I’ve left work and delivered food. I tell them to eat up—focus. They’re present but not there.”

That ends up being additional costs when Serenity could divert that money to other basic needs, including health care. “I’m generally healthy, but my children and husband—we’re making constant trips,” she said. “Their teeth, cutting fingers, breaking

“Even though our income might be above what qualifies me for food stamps, I’ve got medical bills. I had cancer twice. My wife takes no prescription medications, but she has arthritis and is buying things to help with that. Our money is depleted, so we go to the food bank.”

bones. They're praying that I stay good to take care of them."

Even though all 11 of our participants have Medicaid or Medicare, they still have unmet health needs. "[Insurance plans] help a little bit but not totally. It's a big bill for me anyway," said Dennis, who is paying for his divorce with a third mortgage on his property. "The insurance is there, but it's not enough by the time you pay all your other bills."

Part of the problem is that co-pays add up. "You go to the doctor, pay \$10, then that fool will tell you to go to a specialist," said Erika. "You pay \$40-50, and they will tell you to come back to get a test. That's another \$40-50, then they tell you come back for the result for another \$40-50. That's \$150 to just find out the problem."

Another problem is finding a quality provider who accepts their insurance. "The choice of my doctors is minimal," stated Tina. "I have to pick what I can afford, not what's best."

Participants asked their lawmakers to prioritize making health care affordable. "Work on the medical costs to get it affordable for people on government incomes," suggested Dennis.

"I would like to see Medicaid accept people that have assets," stated Erika. "I can't get Medicaid because I have a 401k from previous jobs; I have a house. I would like to have my retirement and have Medicaid. Work it out."

Mary and Frenchell consider themselves to be lucky. "If we didn't have housing, we wouldn't have a place to live," said Mary, who has lived in Spokane for 55 years. "We're on limited income, and housing covers most of our rent. We're very blessed that way."

Things weren't always this stable. "We were homeless for a couple of months," explained Mary. "We moved into another place, but he threw us out. We got money from DSHS, and then our housing came through. We're lucky."

"We waited eight years for Section 8," added Frenchell, in his deep, quiet voice. "They lost us in the system, but it came at an opportune time," said Mary. "We were in a shelter at the time. We've been on it for 15 years now. We had four kids; we needed a house."

Their kids are grown, but Mary and Frenchell are still raising a child—their grandson Jared. Now that the two are living on Social Security, having housing assistance plus help from SNAP, the food bank, and Medicaid help them stretch their fixed income to get by.

And it really is scraping to get by. "We get \$129 [in SNAP]," said

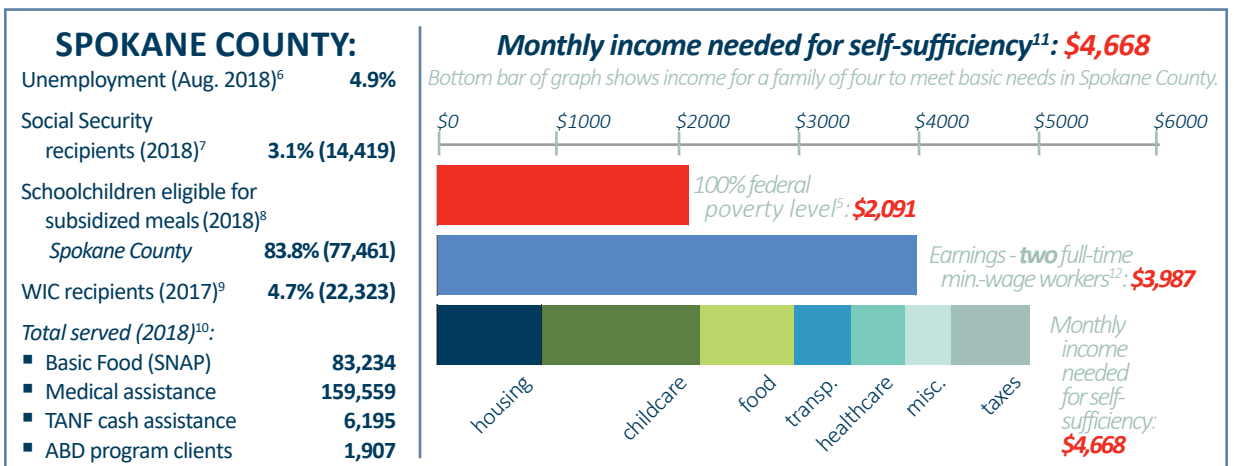


Frenchell. "It doesn't get much." "We use food stamps to afford meat," added Mary. "We don't have enough as it is. If we didn't have food stamps, eggs, your basic things, would be gone."

SNAP helps the family buy more nutritious food that can be hard to find at the food bank: "You don't get the nutritional needs from food banks that you need—a lot of sweets and canned pasta," said Mary.

At the same time, the food bank can provide food that they can't afford on a limited SNAP budget. Mary added, "Sometimes, if it wasn't for the food pantry, we wouldn't have milk in the house for Jared."

Protecting these programs is imperative to keeping them from slipping below poverty. Mary implores, "Improve the food stamp program." Frenchell added, "Social Security—leave it alone. I'm going to live with it but bring it up a little because \$15,000/year doesn't cut it."



GRAYS HARBOR COUNTY



Population³: Ocean Shores—5,569; Grays Harbor County—72,797

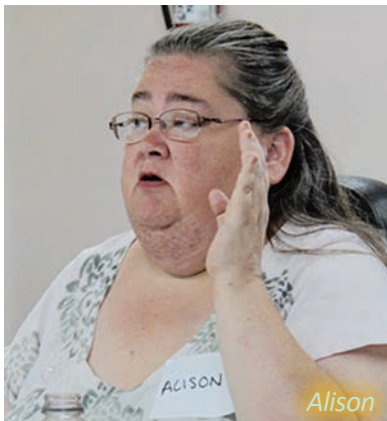
Ocean Shores

Before its incorporation as a city, the coastal town of Ocean Shores was a beach house development community, home to singer Pat Boone, and host of celebrity golf tournaments. Ocean Shores maintains its vacation town reputation today.

“It’s a resort area,” said Danica, a former pastry chef who has lived in Ocean Shores for the last 16 years. “No one that works here is making a career here,” she added.

“There’s no employment: it’s temporary, not career or big money employment,” explained Glory Ann, who grew up in Seattle but has also lived in California and Michigan. “It attracts retirement, the people who own vacation homes.”

According to the 2010 Census, the median age of the town is 57.3-years-old.¹⁴ Many of our focus group participants



Alison

are retirees, living on a fixed income of Social Security but no other savings.

“I pay taxes. I worked my whole life. I have nothing but my Social Security,” said Val, who came to Ocean Shores three years ago to work in the casinos. “Am I out of money right now? You betcha. I’ve never in my life lived like I’m living now.”

With vacation homes driving up property values, housing costs eat up a significant portion of a fixed, Social Security income. Rod was a truck driver before an accident caused him to fall behind with steep medical bills. He asked, “How people come in here on Social Security, pay \$1000/month in rent or more—how are these people eating?”

Health insurance should help contain medical costs, but participants complained that they had difficulty finding local providers who accept their coverage. “I couldn’t find a doctor in the county that was taking Medicare patients,” said Alison, who moved to Ocean Shores with her husband Michael four months ago. “I couldn’t find a care provider—it was ridiculous!”

In some cases, the only provider options are so far away that distance is a barrier to care. “My referrals were in the U District (of Seattle)—that’s a 5.5-hour drive from here,” stated Val.

“I get VA benefits. It’s hard for me to get a doctor here,” said Francis, who shares her home with her grandchildren, her daughter, and her daughter’s boyfriend. “I have to go to Tacoma. I don’t drive. The church used to give me a ride but stopped, because it’s a liability.” Luckily, she sees a VA doctor who travels to Ocean Shores every three months in a motorhome.

But others aren’t so lucky: “I tried to get some help for transportation,” said Savannah, who must go to Harborview Hospital in Seattle for her Stage IV cancer treatment. “They decided they can’t do it once a month, so I have to budget really carefully: I plan three appointments all at once. It’s an all-day affair. I get up at 4 a.m., drive all the way up there in my 20-year-old Jeep, get home at midnight.”

“It’s hard for me to walk into a food bank. I don’t like taking handouts. I worked my whole life—70 hours a week.”

—Rod

Supplemental insurance can help with costs and increase in-network provider options, but this is another expense that may get pushed aside when dealing with a tight budget. “I’m on Medicare and get just \$14 in food stamps,” said Danica. “I do not have supplemental insurance because after I get done paying all my bills, sometimes I have \$50 to live on for the whole month or less.”

Like Danica, many of our focus group participants with Social Security benefits received the minimum amount of monthly SNAP benefits—just \$15 per month. This does not go far when compared to high food costs at the local grocery store. “[This store]—it’s the only game in town. Otherwise, I have to drive,” said Rod. “I do the math: the price of food—is that worth the price of gas to drive all the way to Aberdeen? Go all the way into Aberdeen, you pay a dollar or two less.”

“With the food stamp program, they cut us back from \$30 each to \$15 between the two of us. We’ve been married for five years. They cut us back. We’re still two people—still two human beings that need food.”

Participants then rely on the food bank when food costs are high and food budgets are minimal. Cheryl's favorite foods are whatever is in season. She advised, "If you're going to use the food bank, use it with your food stamps. They get a lot of canned stuff. I get a lot of fresh fruit and vegetables from the p-garden. What do you get there? What can you get with food stamps?"

Food banks are a limited resource. "You're maybe allowed to go only once, sometimes twice a month," said Alison. "When you're running out of your food stamps and money, you go back to the food bank, but you're running out of food."

To avoid starvation, some find little choice but to find odd jobs to supplement their fixed incomes. "I have some supplemental little jobs," confessed Danica. "I look at it as survival. I don't believe any human being should have to be homeless, let alone starving in their own house."

Participants call on their lawmakers to look out for retirees by protecting the programs on which they rely. "Stop trimming Social Security. Stop trimming Medicare," declared Alison. "All I have to go to is the food bank. I worked three jobs at one time. I had a career in nursing. I've put my money in, paid my taxes. I'm not trying to get a handout—just trying to survive."

"I've lived in Washington my whole life but just a couple months here in Ocean Shores," said Liz, a 37-year-old mother.

A younger member of our focus group, Liz is working-aged but unemployed. "I used to work at a college, instructed students on dos and don'ts of job interviews, how to dress for success," she said.

Liz wants to work, but it's been a struggle to find a job. "I'm a recovering drug addict. I've been to prison for crimes I committed," she explained. "I knew if I didn't want to go back to prison, I'd have to change my life."

"I got clean, went to college, got a degree in Business Administration," she continued. "I've had it for 10 years, and I have not had one job in 10 years. It's discouraging."

Liz has limited resources to help her and her children meet their basic needs. "I don't have family I can call or borrow money from," she said. "My dad's alive but might as well be dead. My mom died as a teenager—there's nobody I can call."

Liz and her family currently get food assistance, thanks to SNAP and the food bank, but her household runs out of food on a monthly basis: "At the end



of the month, when the money runs out," she said, "That's one week without food."

The stress is taking its toll on Liz's health, and without additional resources, she may be paying the price with her life. "I don't go to the doctor unless I think I'm dying," she stated. "I will probably die of a stroke before the end of the year. I have severe hypertension."

Liz asks lawmakers and communities to pay more attention to people who are living unsheltered. "The people that live on the streets—they live on the river in Aberdeen—communities look at these people like they are lesser quality, but those people know more about life experience than anybody. They probably have more to offer as far as ideas to help."

GRAYS HARBOR COUNTY:

Unemployment (Aug. 2018)⁵ **5.9%**

Social Security recipients (2018)⁷ **4.3% (3,101)**

Schoolchildren eligible for subsidized meals (2018)⁸
Grays Harbor County **87.4% (10,878)**

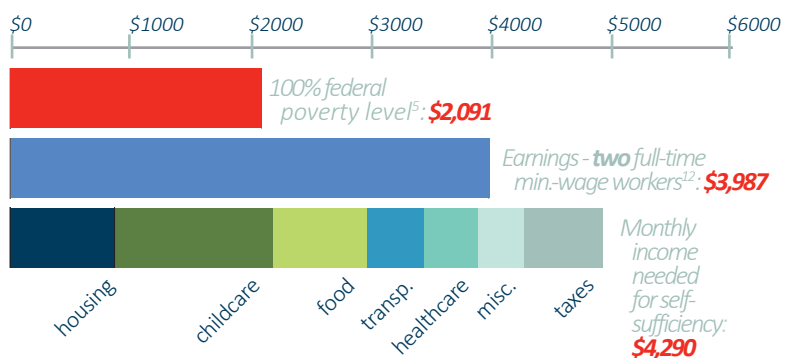
WIC recipients (2017)⁹ **5.0% (3,612)**

Total served (2018)¹⁰:

- Basic Food (SNAP) **15,495**
- Medical assistance **27,104**
- TANF cash assistance **1,027**
- ABD program clients **343**

Monthly income needed for self-sufficiency¹¹: **\$4,290**

Bottom bar shows income for a family of 4 to meet basic needs in Grays Harbor County.



PIERCE COUNTY



Population³: Orting—6,746;
Pierce County—795,225

Orting

We visited the town of Orting on a sunny, late August afternoon. After driving towards stunning views of Mt. Rainier, we arrived at the Orting Food Bank, located across the street from a park where kids appeared to be playing basketball and participating in a cheerleading camp.

It was a good reminder that a variety of child nutrition programs help kids be active and healthy. The WIC program helps pregnant and nursing women, infants, and young children get the nutrition needed for healthy development. “I think I had healthier pregnancies than I would have without WIC,” said Ellen, who left Orting when she graduated from high school but moved back in 1984. “If it could have gone on longer, past the age of 5, that would have been great.”

During the summer, there are free meals for children



at the park every weekday, but access is still an issue. “There’s no gas money to get in the town,” said Peggy, whose daughter and grandchildren live with her. Without this resource, her daughter makes sacrifices to feed her family on other limited resources. “[My daughter] won’t eat. She’ll feed the kids, and that’s it.”

When school is back in session, school meals can ease the pressure on a limited food budget. Families usually complete applications to determine if they are eligible for free or reduced-price meals, but income eligibility can be established without paperwork with direct certification. “If you get food stamps, you also get free lunch and breakfast for the kids,” noted Rebecca, who also shares her home with her grandchildren.

“We qualify for lots of other services, just not food stamps,” said Britta, whose husband works full-time to support their family of six.

When Britta tried applying for SNAP, she ran into problems. “It is very hard to talk to someone at a normal, decent time of the day,” she reported. “It’s an accessibility issue.”

For others in our focus group with at least one working household member, SNAP is used sparingly. Angela is a new mom, originally from East St. Louis. “I’ve used it from time to time,” she stated. “Right now, I’m trying to make it without.”

“I’ve just never tried [SNAP],” stated Frances, a homemaker and expectant mother. “Our income is enough right now to pay for food.”

Three people in our focus group were currently working. “I work at Nordstrom up in Bonney Lake,” said Rebecca.

“They used to give me about four or five days. I worked about four hours a day. Now I’m only getting one or two days.”

Others, who are looking for work, aren’t getting hired. Joann has lived in Orting for all her 68 years. “There aren’t jobs for seniors,” she complained. “You can call them, but they ask your birthdate, and then they hang up on you.”

“For my age group, there are jobs I’ve been offered,” said Britta. “But with my kid situation, I’m not able to pay for daycare.”

The jobs that Britta could take don’t pay enough to cover the child care costs she would need in order to go to work. Her household tries to get by on her husband’s salary alone, but it’s not enough to cover basic expenses. “When we have to pay our mortgage, that’s our whole pay check,” she said. “We need food still. That’s when it hits us.”

“The problem with prescriptions is the last time I went to get my husband’s heart medication, I would pay a \$45 co-pay, but this time, it was \$155. So, it’s still at the drug store until I can pick it up, and his insulin is \$300/month. It gets really hard to pay for all of that.”

—Vicky

Participants also cited high health care costs as a barrier to affording nutritious food. “If you don’t get any of the assistance, it’s really expensive,” said Frances, who needs two root canals, but she can’t afford the co-pay on her insurance plan to get them done.

Nonetheless, Frances values

“I have to learn to adapt, and this is where pride goes out the window. I’m really fortunate: due to my military training, there’s not much I can’t survive.”

having health coverage because without it, “We would be in debt,” she said. “We just got out of debt earlier this year. I don’t want that to ever happen again.”

Vicky and her husband both have disabilities. She shared Frances’s fear of going without health insurance. “It’s scary to think about,” she said. “I might be ok, but my husband would just die.”

Luckily, the food bank is one of the few services that low-income, working families can access. “There’s a week—a couple of weeks—when we don’t have money left,” declared Britta. “The food bank helps us tremendously with feeding those kiddos.”

“I’m going to the food bank more,” said Rebecca, explaining how she copes with the loss of work hours. “Some of [the food banks] only do once a month, but I had to go to another one.”

There are problems with relying on the food bank as a primary food resource, especially if you have special dietary needs. “Being diabetic, it’s really hard to get your diet plan down with what you get,” said Joann. “My blood sugar is way out of control.”

Participants asked lawmakers to be more understanding of the realities of the high costs of living on a limited income. “Come out and play in our shoes for two months,” said Bob, a veteran. “Trade places. See how easy they handle the stress of not knowing where your next meal will come from or not knowing if you’ll have a roof over your head.”

Lexie is a small business owner. She works part-time to supplement her Social Security. She also relies on the food bank for herself and to help her two grown sons.

Lexie runs a hair salon in a retirement home. “I found that the cost of licenses, the cost of supplies, the cost of trying to stay in business—it goes up a bit every year, it seems,” she said.

Lexie works additional jobs when she can find them. “The Puyallup Fair hires seniors, so I’m working there for a few weeks along with my other job,” she explained. “That means seven days a week, no day off, for three weeks. I hope I know my name in the end.”

Lexie needs the supplemental income to keep up with basic costs of living. “I have a budget book, but I don’t seem to be consistent at keeping a budget,” she quipped. “If something happens, it’s so different, it throws it off.”

Lexie’s other option is to find ways to reduce expenses, but at what cost? “I turn my heat off so I can save money: it’s only \$20/month,” she said. “I wear sweatshirts; I turn on the oven in the morning.”

She’ll pay higher heating costs during the winter when it’s too cold to go without heat. “I pay my bills in the winter, but



Lexie

I don’t have money for other things,” she explained. “Or I try to save during the summer to pay them.” She also looks for affordable ways to weatherize her home. “It’s just me—I’m very small, so it doesn’t take a lot. I put towels under the front door,” she added.

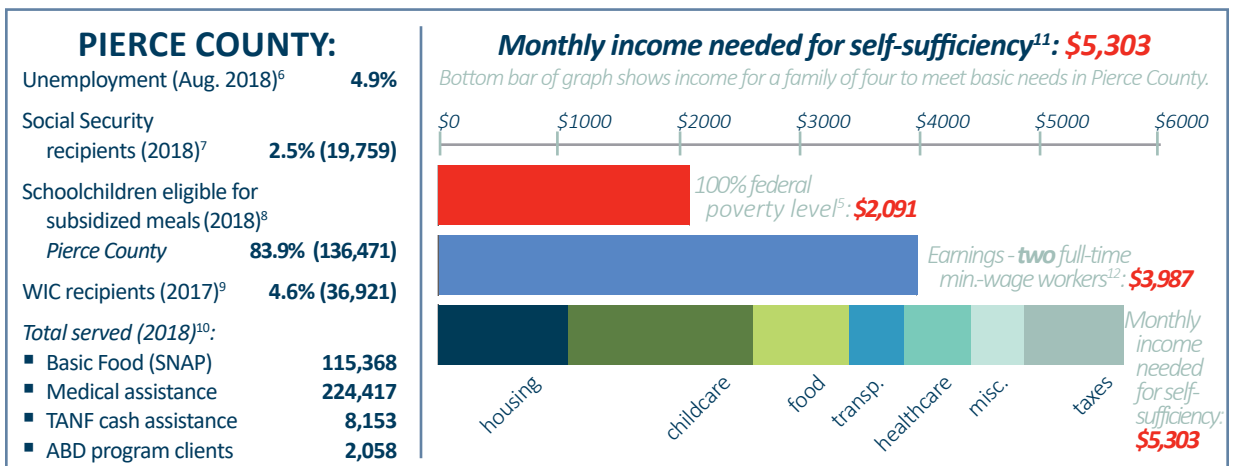
Lexie worries about how long she’ll be able to keep working. “My eyes have changed. I worry if I’m seeing well enough to work,” she said. On her insurance, an eye exam costs \$200 out-of-pocket, and it would cost an additional \$350 for glasses.

“I’ve gone to sign-up at different places for housing once I can’t work,” she said. “Those lists are 60-70 people ahead of me.”

Lexie asks her lawmakers to enhance basic needs assistance: “We need more affordable housing,” she said. “That and health care and nutrition.”

“Make the cost of living more affordable for people,” added

Frances. “Add more to programs to help those that need help.”



CONCLUSION

Nutritious food can be a low-barrier solution to stabilizing crises for struggling individuals and families. When nutritious food is readily available, then kids have the fuel they need to focus on learning, adults can maintain the good health needed to find and keep working, and limited resources can be stretched to cover other essential needs for housing, health care, child care, and repairs. In other words, nutritious food lays the foundation to healthier, stronger communities. This is why we believe that food is a basic human right. We must prioritize putting our resources and our energy toward creating more equitable access to nutritious food for all in Washington.

But we can't do this work alone. It takes a combined effort of private and public sector resources to help struggling families build a pathway out of poverty to a more prosperous future. Our focus group participants have told us over and over that they skip meals in order to put their limited resources toward paying the rent or to pay for life saving medications. When we strengthen assistance for food, housing, health care, and other essentials, households have the foundation upon which they can build stability and climb their way up out of poverty. These are our recommendations to protect and strengthen those programs and supports that are essential for struggling individuals, families, and seniors.

1. *Protect and strengthen SNAP*

- Preserve SNAP's flexibility to meet need
- Increase benefits to ensure adequate nutrition
- Reduce barriers to participation for seniors and people with disabilities
- Invest in employment and training

SNAP helps low-income households buy nutritious food from grocery stores, farmers markets, and farm stands. This is why SNAP is our first line of defense against hunger: it helps struggling families put food on the table while generating economic activity and jobs in our communities.

Last year, SNAP helped 1 in 8 struggling Washingtonians. More than 59% of Washington's SNAP participants are families with children, almost a third live in a household with a senior or a person with a disability, and 42% are in working families. SNAP has kept 208,000 Washingtonians out of poverty, including 96,000 children. Last year, SNAP pumped more than \$1.3 billion into Washington's economy.¹⁵

SNAP grows and decreases according to economic need. Here in Washington, the SNAP caseload rose through the height of the Great Recession and has been steadily declining throughout our economic recovery. In other words, SNAP is doing exactly as it was designed to do. Congress must continue to reject harmful proposals that take away this flexibility—proposals that limit eligibility or that use block grants to freeze spending levels.

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) helps SNAP benefits reach more eligible people while reducing red tape and wasteful administrative burdens in processing. These state options must be protected.

We must also increase SNAP

benefits to ensure that participants can buy adequate amounts of nutritious food. The average SNAP participant currently has roughly \$4 per day in food assistance. Currently, SNAP allotments are based on the Thrifty Food Plan, the most economical of the USDA food budget plans, but one that is sorely outdated and designed for emergent, temporary bouts of hunger.¹⁶ If SNAP allotments were based on the Low Cost Food Plan, it would raise benefits and be calculated on a food budget that is better designed to meet basic nutrition needs. As a result, SNAP recipients would be healthier and better able to afford more palatable, nutritious food.

Although, for the most part, SNAP is temporary assistance for people as they cycle off and back into jobs, SNAP is a critical, ongoing lifeline for low-income seniors and people with disabilities who are not able to work. In fact, nationally, 1 in 10 seniors must rely on SNAP to put food on their tables.¹⁷ Yet many low income seniors and people with disabilities who live on a fixed income qualify for the minimum monthly benefit, which is just \$15 per month.¹⁸ Many feel discouraged from applying for SNAP because \$15 does not add much to a limited food budget—a budget that is tightly constrained when fixed incomes barely cover basic needs for housing, health care, and utilities. Raising the minimum benefit would make it more affordable for seniors to purchase the nutritious food they need to be active and independent, and it would also provide more incentive for seniors to complete the application process which would connect them to other needed services.

Additionally, we should reduce administrative barriers for seniors and people with disabilities to encourage applying for and

participating in SNAP. Establishing a standard medical deduction could help low-income seniors and people with disabilities by reducing the need to track every health care receipt while reducing administrative costs. The end result would be improved payment accuracy for administrative agencies, increased SNAP benefits for seniors and people with disabilities, and reduced red tape.

Finally, we believe that those on SNAP who are able to work, should work, and that is exactly what we see: SNAP helps 1 in 9 Washington workers put food on their tables.¹⁹ In Washington, many of our working SNAP participants earn lower wages, because they work jobs that are temporary or seasonal in nature. Many of our rural communities primarily rely on agricultural, fishing, forestry, and tourism jobs that are not available year-round. Efforts to maintain or tighten time limits on SNAP related to work requirements hurt under-employed individuals, including those who are raising or supporting children. Instead, we should continue to invest in and expand employment and training programs that help SNAP participants receive additional educational credits, on the job training, and supportive case management services that help them find and keep good paying jobs that are available in their communities.

Above all, our chief recommendation is 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

- Increase the purchasing power of SNAP and WIC to buy more fruits and vegetables

- Expand marketing opportunities for Washington growers
- Protect our food safety net

SNAP is a powerful anti-poverty program, and Washington has been home to incredibly effective programs that boost the purchasing power of SNAP, making nutritious fruits and vegetables more affordable for households struggling to get by on a SNAP budget.

For the last four years, Washington has been home to the largest USDA Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive (FINI) grant. Support from this grant has helped SNAP shoppers by providing matching dollars when SNAP is used to buy fruits and vegetables at grocery stores and at 90 farmers markets throughout our state. Additionally, with support from FINI, 15 community health providers provide fruit and vegetable prescriptions for food insecure SNAP participants. These are cash value vouchers used for purchasing fruits and vegetables at participating grocery stores and farmers markets. These programs have been incredibly successful, resulting in increased fruit and vegetable consumption and preventing participating households from missing meals.²⁰

Federal funding for these programs is currently scheduled to end in December 2019. It's time for Washington to provide a sustaining investment in these programs. A state investment would not only help ensure uninterrupted support to help more low-income SNAP participants continue to eat more nutritious fruits and vegetables, often grown here in Washington state, but it would also position Washington for additional federal dollars should Washington apply for another federal FINI grant.

We can also increase the consumption of fresh, locally

grown food throughout our state with an investment in programs at the Washington State Department of Agriculture (WSDA) that help Washington's growers expand and diversify their marketing opportunities at schools, hospitals, restaurants, food pantries, and other institutions. Funding for Washington's Farm to School and Small Farms Direct Marketing programs was completely eliminated in 2011 despite bipartisan support for this important work. Since then, we have seen partial, often one-time restorations of funding. WSDA has also piloted grants to help local food pantries purchase produce from local growers for distribution to our neighbors in need. These programs need sustainable, ongoing funding to continue this important work of helping our farmers grow their businesses while getting fresh, nutritious food to Washingtonians in need.

Washington should also continue to protect and strengthen food access programs, including the Farmers Market Nutrition Programs for families on WIC and low-income seniors, state funding for food banks, and food assistance for legally residing immigrants who cannot access SNAP. These programs work together with other federal nutrition assistance programs, cobbling together a fragile but necessary food safety net for struggling households. Any cuts to these programs would only roll back the progress we have made in decreasing hunger in our state.

3. Help kids and infants get the healthiest start

- Increase access and participation in school meals for low-income kids
- Streamline funding to provide seamless meals for kids year-round

CONCLUSION (CONT.)

- Expand summer EBT
- Extend WIC benefits to age 6

Children need consistent access to nutritious food to help them focus on learning in school, and to be active and healthy where they live and play.

We are grateful that in 2018, the Washington State Legislature took the important and decisive action to make breakfast available during the school day at high poverty schools, a policy that has proven effective in other states to help more low-income students eat a nutritious school breakfast that they may otherwise miss. We must continue to do more to help reduce barriers to school meal participation for high-need students.

Schools and school districts that are eligible for the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) should explore whether it makes financial sense for them to enroll, as 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 meals or who are challenged with significant challenges like homelessness or living in foster care, to do away with paper applications and focus their efforts on providing universal free meals. Washington should also work on increasing accuracy in directly certifying SNAP, TANF, and Medicaid households for the school meals program in order to identify our full potential slate of CEP eligible schools and school districts. Participation in CEP and increased use of direct certification help ensure that more eligible students receive free school meals, and as a result, schools receive higher federal reimbursements per meal served.

We can also expand access to school meals by eliminating the school lunch co-pay for students

who are income eligible for reduced price meals. For many working poor families, paying the co-pay for school lunch can be an economic hardship when money is needed to pay the rent, utilities, childcare, or other essential needs. Eliminating the co-pay helps these families stretch their budgets further while ensuring that their kids never miss a nutritious meal at school.

Hunger doesn't take a vacation: when schools close their doors, students still need to eat. After school and summer meals programs help low-income students, but Congress can do more to break down barriers for meal providers in order to increase access and participation. Congressman Rick Larsen has co-sponsored the *Summer Meals Act* which opens up area eligibility requirements to help increase the number of locations that could host a free summer meals site. The legislation also combines funding streams for after school and summer meals programs, helping meal providers streamline administrative burdens in order to provide seamless meals for kids year-round.

We can also increase access to nutritious food during the summer months by expanding the summer EBT program. The *Stop Child Summer Hunger Act*, sponsored by Senator Patty Murray, provides food assistance to households that are eligible for free and reduced school meals during the summer months. The additional assistance would help low-income households buy more food to provide breakfast and lunch during the summer months, meals that would otherwise be eaten at school. Summer EBT provides more food access for families that can't get to a summer meals site and stretches food budgets so that no parent or child need miss a meal.

Participants in our focus groups

universally liked the healthy food that they were able to purchase for their children or while pregnant or nursing with benefits from WIC, but we can close the food gap for those young kids who age off of WIC but are not yet old enough to enroll into kindergarten to eat meals at school by extending WIC to a child's 6th birthday. This way, young kids can continue to get nutritious fruits, vegetables, dairy, and other key ingredients to feed their brain development, so they are better prepared to learn when they start school.

4. Support access to affordable and safe housing

- Increase assistance to keep vulnerable people housed
- Prevent homelessness with added tenant protections

The Housing and Essential Needs (HEN) program provides critically needed assistance to people with severe physical and mental disabilities who are unable to work. With this assistance from HEN, participants are better able to pay the rent and pay for utilities, helping to keep a roof over their heads. Doubling the state investment in this program would ensure that all eligible individuals are able to access and participate in this program, eliminating existing waitlists.

We can also increase housing stability and prevent homelessness by increasing protections for renters. Current law allows landlords to begin eviction proceedings just three days after the rent is due. Giving extra time to stay in the home could give families the day or two needed until the next pay check comes to pay the rent. Current law also allows landlords to give just 20 days' notice to tenants to move for just cause terminations of a lease. Giving families more notice also gives them more time to find a new

place to live, preventing them from being put out on the street.

5. *Provide access to affordable health cares*

- Protect our state's success in expanding access to health care provided by the Affordable Care Act
- Create a public option for our state's health care exchange

In every focus group we conducted, nearly 100% of participants reported having health insurance, an important tool to keep down health care expenses. 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 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.

But as our focus group participants told us time and time again, important improvements can be made to public health insurance to reduce out-of-pocket expenses, especially for co-pays, the cost of which can be a barrier to accessing health care or buying prescription medications. Washington can design, negotiate, and purchase a public option for our state's health exchange, one that provides coverage for a variety of services, reduced cost co-pays, and other protections at a sliding scale cost, so that a larger pool of people can afford to buy and use a good health plan.

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

- Reduce the most punitive barriers to participating in TANF
- Expand and fund the Working Families Tax Credit (Washington's Earned Income Tax Credit)
- Support efforts that create steady jobs with livable wages

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.

The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program is intended to help families with children who live in deep poverty afford basic necessities while receiving workforce and child care services to help parents find and keep good paying jobs. Yet according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, TANF reaches only 26 out of every 100 poor families with children in Washington.²³ Despite efforts by the Legislature to restore some of the promise of TANF by restoring the cash benefit back to 2011 levels, more work must be done to help families actually access the program by removing punitive TANF policies that prevent families from enrolling or staying on the program. We can do more for these families by extending time limits and reforming sanction policies to help more families who are doing their best to comply with program requirements actually stay enrolled in programs and services.

For families that are working, we have a tool on our statute books that is the most effective anti-poverty program: a tax credit that returns a portion of paid sales taxes to low wage families that they can then use to pay for food, rent, and other essential needs. The Working Families Tax Credit, our state's version of the Federal Earned Income Tax Credit, was enacted but never funded in our state's budget. Let's make 2019 the year that we fund this tax credit, and while we're at it, let's expand the pool of low-wage workers who can and should be eligible for this program, such as students and immigrant families.

Lastly, but most importantly, we should 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.

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 is building

CONCLUSION (CONT.)

a movement to create more equitable access to nutritious food for all Washingtonians. If you share our vision for healthier, thriving communities, built on the stability provided when no one worries where their next meal will come from, then please

join us. Pledge your best effort to help us cut hunger in half in Washington by 2028 by learning about how hunger and poverty in our state is shaped by our laws and institutions and speaking up for the sound policies and budget investments that help create a

more equitable food system. Our work is nothing without your partnership and action. Together, we can build a better, brighter, healthier future for all who call Washington home.

PROCESS AND POVERTY MEASURES

Process

Focus groups were held in 2018 at five locations across Washington, representing rural, urban, and suburban areas in San Juan, Benton, Spokane, Grays Harbor, and Pierce 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 Standard¹¹

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 poverty⁵ 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 2017, 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 Wage²² 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 \$11.50 per hour for 2018, 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 \$11.50 per hour in 2018, they fell short of meeting the self-sufficiency standard in that county.

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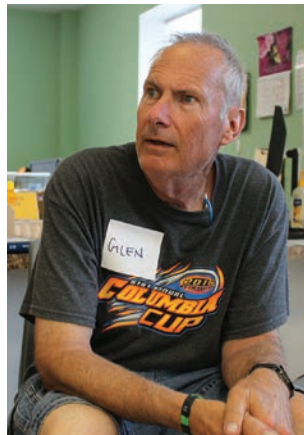
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Northwest Harvest strongly encourages readers of this report to take action by speaking out against policies that contribute to cycles of poverty and hunger. Contact your elected officials, and tell them how these issues affect all of us and the health 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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