

Policies to End Hunger in Washington State: Campaign Development for the Anti-Hunger & Nutrition Coalition 2023 Legislative Priorities

Andrea Litzow, UW Nutritional Sciences Program, MPH-Nutrition Student & Dietetic Intern
Preceptors: Claire Lane, Director, and Christina Wong, Chair, Anti-Hunger & Nutrition Coalition

UNIVERSITY of WASHINGTON
SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH



BACKGROUND

WASHINGTON STATE FACES EXTRAORDINARY IMPACTS TO HUNGER & FOOD INSECURITY IN THE WAKE OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC.

- > Nearly 1 in 2 WA households reported food insecurity and over half received some kind of food assistance, with even higher rates among:¹
 - People of color
 - Those of low- to modest-income
 - Rural areas
 - Households with children

- > Expiration of temporary pandemic-era expansions to the social safety net, including federal emergency "boosts" to food benefits and waivers that allowed schools to offer free meals to all kids^{2,3}

- > Inflation deepens economic instability among low- and even modest-income households¹

- > Demand on hunger relief organizations anticipated to increase as emergency food programs grapple with ongoing supply chain issues and rising costs^{1,4}



Significant & permanent solutions are needed to tackle the hunger crisis.

The project focused on campaign research and development to support the following 2023 anti-hunger legislative priorities:

- > Early Action Budget for Hunger Relief (HB 1784)
- > Free School Meals for All Kids (HB 1238)
- > Hunger-Free College Campuses (HB 1559)

A world of
HEALTHY PEOPLE

OBJECTIVES

1. Conduct campaign research through collection, analysis, and summary of existing data pertaining to legislative priorities
2. Develop content, messaging, and campaign materials to support various legislative priorities

METHODS

- > Review of complex nutrition programs, i.e. SNAP/Basic Food, school meals, emergency food, etc.
- > Analysis of peer-reviewed literature, industry reports, professional publications, and past campaign materials
- > Collaboration with anti-hunger lobbyists, coalition partners, legislators and legislative staff, national experts, and community-based organizations
- > Synthesis of information and findings into succinct, didactic campaign messaging
- > Creation of campaign materials to inform and encourage support of state-level, anti-hunger policies

RESULTS

- > 7-page policy brief highlighting the growing hunger crisis, those communities most impacted, and programs and policies needed to address food & economic insecurity and create an equitable recovery
- > 2-page policy handout on Free School Meals for All bill, as well as talking points and sector-specific fact sheets related to health & nutrition, education, and equity
- > 2-page policy handout on Hunger-Free College Campuses bill
- > 2-page policy handout on Early Action Budget for Hunger Relief bill

CAMPAIGN MATERIALS

Policy Brief Resource

The State of Hunger in Washington State and Solutions to Achieve Food Security & Economic Stability A Brief by the Anti-Hunger and Nutrition Coalition | March 2023

Washington has experienced extraordinary impacts to hunger & food insecurity in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. State and federal funding has helped to address increased need and provide temporary expansion of the social safety net during the pandemic. Yet, critical pandemic-era benefits, such as unemployment and housing programs, as well as expansion of cash benefits like the Child Tax Credit, have since expired. Most recently, federal emergency "boosts" to food benefits for recipients of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)—known as Basic Food in Washington—expired at the end of February.

The result was an estimated loss of \$93 million per month in federal funds statewide to Washington's 870,000 Basic Food participants and an average decrease of \$90 a month per recipient.^{1,2} Seniors and people with disabilities, who receive the minimum benefit, are subject to more severe cuts from \$281 to \$23/month.³ These cuts are expected to result in a "hunger cliff" and put further strain on hunger relief organizations, like food banks, which saw demand spike during the pandemic and have continued to grapple with supply chain and rising food and transportation costs.

Inflation has further deepened economic instability among low- and even modest-income households. USDA recently reported a historic 10% increase in food prices in 2022 and predicts an additional 7% increase in 2023, which is likely to further increase food insecurity and demand for food assistance.⁴ Additional state and federal investments to food and nutrition assistance and other critical programs that provide economic stability are more essential than ever. This brief highlights the growing hunger crisis in our state, those communities most severely impacted, and the programs and policies needed to address food & economic insecurity and create an equitable recovery for all Washingtonians.

HUNGER & FOOD INSECURITY CLIMB AT UNPRECEDENTED RATES STATEWIDE.

Millions of Washingtonians experience food insecurity and the crisis is growing, according to recent data from the Washington State Food Security Survey (WAFSS). The study—which intentionally oversamples those with lower incomes to provide deeper insights on food insecurity—found nearly 1 in 2 households (49%) reported food insecurity⁵ in early winter 2022/23 (Fig. 1), a 19% increase from early in the pandemic (Fig. 2).⁶

Figure 1: Food security among WAFSS households from Dec. 2022 to Jan. 2023

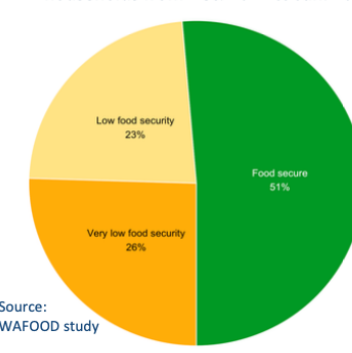
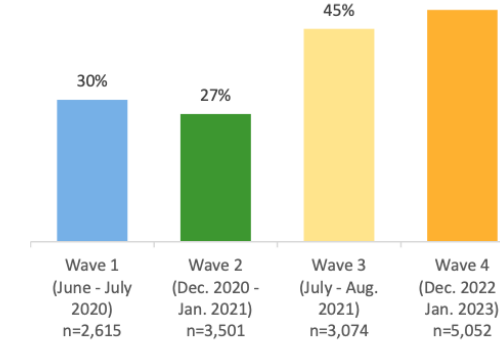


Figure 2: Food insecurity among WAFSS households over time

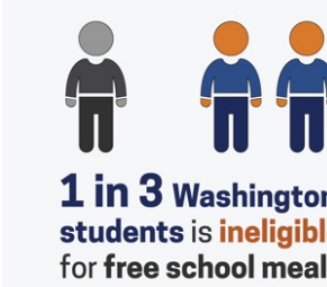


Free School Meals for All WA Kids

Support E2SHB1238 / SB5339 to provide 90,000 more students healthy, free school meals.

A bold vision for every student, at every meal.

Washington has worked hard to remove barriers so more students can access healthy, appealing school meals at no cost and to help reduce childhood hunger in our state. **And still, nearly 1 in 3 Washington students are ineligible for free school meals.** The original bill had a bold vision to redefine basic education and provide free school meals to all students in Washington regardless of their grade, the school they attend, or their family circumstances—like textbooks & transportation.



The revised bill provides free school meals to all students who attend a high-need, high poverty elementary school, expanding free school breakfast and lunch to 90,000 more students during a critical developmental period. Through this vital legislation, we continue the momentum toward ensuring all students have the same access to adequate, nutritious, and appealing meals for their success in school and beyond.

Creating equitable access for all students to thrive.

Current eligibility requirements, along with other barriers such as paperwork, stigma, or not attending a school eligible for the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), leave far too many students out. For a family of four to qualify for subsidized meals, they must earn a household income no greater than \$51,338; yet the state's living wage for a family of four with two working adults is \$100,755 per year.¹ With the loss of federal pandemic-era waivers that allowed Washington schools to offer free meals to all students, regardless of family circumstances, many kids are once again exposed to the risks of hunger, and families struggle to make ends meet as food and other costs of basic living remain stubbornly high.

Food insecurity rose when the pandemic began and has remained high, disproportionately impacting low-income students and students of color: Black, Hispanic, and American Indian/Alaska Native households report rates as high as 56-77%.² And, households with children are more likely to be food insecure than those without children (62% and 37%, respectively).³ To close the opportunity gap for low-income students and students of color, efforts to expand access to free school meals are essential to ensure all children are exempt from the risks of hunger.

When asked about the impact of free school meals, participants state:

"[It] takes the shame away from asking for money for lunch when I know my parents don't have it."
—STUDENT

"It's made it possible to know my children will have a good nutritious meal at school instead of sending them with a pack of saltines cause we can barely afford anything."
—PARENT

Hunger-Free College Campuses & Early Action Budget for Hunger Relief

End Hunger and Housing Insecurity on College Campuses in Washington State Pass HB 1559 / SB 5566 to invest in postsecondary students' academic success.

Food & housing insecurity all too familiar for today's college students.

Postsecondary students' success requires support beyond tuition and academic needs. Recent research by the Washington Student Achievement Council found 1 in 2 students at 2- and 4-year colleges and universities report not having enough to eat and/or a safe place to live. Many also lack access to other basic needs, such as health care, mental health services, childcare, transportation, and more.^{1,2}

"The year I enrolled, I was put into a tight spot with housing. I tried to work full time and go to school full time, but that didn't end up working out. It's only because of the housing overburden and the college's connection to shared housing services that I was able to [find housing] and continue my education."
—STUDENT

Inequitable access to basic needs at college. As students on college campuses across the state struggle to have their basic needs met (Figure 1), food and housing insecurity impact postsecondary students of color and those with low incomes at disproportionately higher rates.³

• American Indian/Alaska Native and Black students experience food & housing insecurity at 67.8% and 66.8%, respectively (3) • Students who identify as former foster youth, living with a disability, a parent or guardian, or LGBTQ+ experience higher rates of homelessness and food & housing insecurity (4)

1 in 2 WA COLLEGE STUDENTS EXPERIENCE FOOD AND/OR HOUSING INSECURITY

Washington state is amidst a hunger crisis as high food and gas prices persist, and ongoing supply chain issues and unprecedented food and labor shortages cause food banks to grapple to meet the increasing need for food assistance. High rates of food insecurity and poverty are likely to worsen given the complex impacts of COVID-19 on the economy and food supply chain. The upcoming loss of federal funding for food assistance—when Basic Food (SNAP) "emergency allotments" come to an end and March adds further strain by decreasing benefit amounts for nearly a million Washingtonians.

THE IMPENDING HUNGER CLIFF Support HB 1784 to End Hunger & Food Insecurity in Washington State

Washington state is amidst a hunger crisis as high food and gas prices persist, and ongoing supply chain issues and unprecedented food and labor shortages cause food banks to grapple to meet the increasing need for food assistance. High rates of food insecurity and poverty are likely to worsen given the complex impacts of COVID-19 on the economy and food supply chain. The upcoming loss of federal funding for food assistance—when Basic Food (SNAP) "emergency allotments" come to an end and March adds further strain by decreasing benefit amounts for nearly a million Washingtonians.

FOOD BANKS IN CRISIS AS DEMAND REMAINS HIGH. Food banks and pantries across Washington are experiencing record high demand as food insecurity remains greater than 30% in many parts of the state, according to the WAFSS study (Figure 1). In 2019, 1 in 10 Washington households were food insecure (USDA). Yes, food insecurity rates among low-income Washingtonians rose when the pandemic began and have remained as high as 25-30%. The rate was well over 50% among certain households, including those who are (Figure 2):

• Very low income (under \$15,000)
• Black, Hispanic, American Indian/Alaska Native
• Families with children
• Military veterans, among others.

Food insecurity rates among low-income Washingtonians rose when the pandemic began and have remained as high as 25-30%. Despite the need, major food banks are down 75-80% of their food inventory now compared to the time last year, which along with high transportation costs, drastically limits the amount of food available for local food banks and pantries. Coupled with fewer community donations and less volunteer labor, local pantries have dramatically decreased the amount of food served to clients—with many reporting only being able to provide two days' worth of food to households, far from the goal of 6-9 days' supply.

CONCLUSION

- > The 2023 legislative session coincided with unprecedented high rates of food insecurity & hunger given ongoing, complex impacts of the pandemic on the economy & food supply chain.
- > Sustainable, equitable, and permanent policy solutions to improve food access and end hunger require a concerted effort among anti-hunger lobbyists, program service providers, first-person voice, community-based advocates, national experts, and federal & state legislators.

References

1. Otten JJ, Spiker ML, Dai J, Tseng AS, Buszkiewicz JH, Beese S, Collier SM, Ismach A. "Food Security and Food Assistance in the Wake of COVID-19: A 4th Survey of Washington State Households" (February 2023). Washington State Food Security Survey. <https://nutr.uw.edu/cphn/wafood/brief-12>
2. "Offset in Omnibus Would Cut SNAP and Hasten Hunger Cliff for Millions" (December 2022). Food Research & Action Center. <https://frac.org/news/omnibuscutsnaphungercliffdecember2022?eType=EmailBlastContent&id=394cf849-eb08-428d-a407-a8d1959899c7>
3. "Raise Your Hand for Free School Meals for All." Food Research & Action Center. <https://frac.org/healthy-school-meals-for-all>
4. Otten JJ, Collier SM, Spiker ML, Sipos Y, Drewnowski A, Buszkiewicz J, Rose C, Ismach A, Nguyen E. "The State of the Washington State Food System During COVID-19: Taking Stock and Looking Ahead" (December 2021). Center for Public Health Nutrition, University of Washington. <https://cms.agr.wa.gov/WSDAKentico/Documents/DO/Communications/WAFS-FinalReport.pdf>