

# We Must Ensure ALL WASHINGTONIANS HAVE FOOD SECURITY

Good nutrition is an essential building block for healthy children and families. Right now, too many Washingtonians lack the resources to put enough nutritious food on the table. Washington families should be able to depend on regular access to the kind of food that will build and sustain healthy families and communities throughout the state. Households that struggle to eat three meals per day due to a lack of money or other resources, which are described as having food insecurity, represent approximately one in every eight (12.9 percent) Washingtonians in 2016.<sup>1</sup>

## The Importance of Regular Access to Good Food

Not having enough nutritious food to eat every day can have negative impacts on long-term health and well-being. Being food insecure is linked to:



**Overall health problems.**<sup>2</sup> Food insecure adults report poorer physical and mental health. They are also more likely to experience higher rates of chronic diseases, such as heart disease, diabetes, and high blood pressure.<sup>3</sup>



**Higher rates of obesity for women.**<sup>4</sup> Studies have found a relationship between food insecurity and being overweight or obese for women due to factors such as limited access to affordable and healthy food and higher levels of stress and depression.



**Poor academic outcomes for children.**<sup>5</sup> It's hard to learn when you show up to school hungry. Hunger and poor nutrition hurt academic performance for all children, and they can particularly impair social development and reading performance for girls.

### WHAT IS FOOD INSECURITY?

The U.S. Department of Agriculture defines households as **food insecure** if they reported three or more of the following conditions in the last 12 months:

- They worried whether their food would run out before they got money to buy more.
- The food they bought didn't last, and they didn't have money to get more.
- They couldn't afford to eat balanced meals.

Households with **very low food security** met conditions above and also:

- Adults ate less than they felt they should.
- Adults cut the size of meals or regularly skipped meals for three or more months.

Source: USDA, Food Insecurity and Measurement

## We Need Better Data to Support Better Access to Healthy Food

United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) data indicates there are approximately 925,000 residents without adequate access to enough food for their families throughout Washington state. Our state currently lacks data to help lawmakers understand who these residents are, where they live, and if they are effectively being served by existing anti-hunger programs.

At the national level, hunger and food insecurity issues disproportionately impact people of color and people living in poverty.<sup>6</sup> Low-income households that are significantly more likely to have trouble accessing food include single-parent families with children, women and men living alone, and Black- and Latino- headed households.<sup>7</sup> Having this type of data for our state would provide the necessary information to develop targeted strategies to address hunger and minimize inequities for low-income communities and communities of color.

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## Legislation to Better Track Hunger Data Is an Important Step

Legislation focused on collecting data on food insecurity would strengthen efforts to understand and serve individuals who need assistance feeding their families. Legislation being proposed in Washington state would:



**Allow Washington state to report data on food insecurity to inform policy solutions.** The legislation would build on existing health-data-collection efforts by the Washington State Department of Health by adding two USDA food insecurity screening questions to the Behavioral Risk Factor System Survey (BRFSS). BRFSS is an annual statewide phone survey to collect information on health-related risk behaviors, chronic health conditions, and the use of preventive services. The data would report on rates of food insecurity and hunger. It would also provide data across race and ethnicity categories to reflect Washington's demographic diversity as well as across socioeconomic factors.



**Provide information to help state-funded anti-hunger programs better reach eligible populations.** State agencies managing federal nutrition programs would report on how they are meeting national standards of participation, and they would summarize federal dollars that support our state and local communities with these programs.

Combined, these will equip policymakers, researchers, advocates, and community organizations with data to make informed decisions and develop targeted policies and strategies to address hunger and food accessibility problems in Washington.

## IN WASHINGTON STATE:

**12.9%**

*of people face food insecurity<sup>8</sup>*

**4.8%**

*of people are experiencing very low food security, which includes skipping meals, compromised nutrition, and disrupted eating patterns<sup>9</sup>*

**20%**

*of children live in households without food security<sup>10</sup>*

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9. Anti-Hunger & Nutrition Coalition, *Hungry in Washington* (2016).  
10. Kids Count Data Center analysis of pooled 2012-2014 U.S. Census Bureau Current Population Survey, Food Security Supplement, "Children Living in Households that Were Food Insecure at Some Point During the Year," retrieved from <http://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/5201-children-living-in-households-that-were-food-insecure-at-some-point-during-the-year?loc=49&loc=2#detailed/2/49/false/869,36,868,867,133/any/11674,11675> on January 30, 2017.