



Voices of Montana:

Stories of Hunger & Hope



Stories
of **Hunger**
& **Hope**

“Our fight against hunger in Montana takes us from large cities to towns with fewer than a hundred Montanans and across American Indian reservations. We drive through open plains, endless farmlands, and twisting mountain roads to reach those in need. In our work, we have the privilege to talk with people from across the state, highlighting the strength and resilience of those experiencing food insecurity in Montana.”

– **Gayle Carlson**, CEO, Montana Food Bank Network



Introduction

Montana Food Bank Network works to end hunger in Montana through our network of 280 community partners, including food pantries, Backpack programs, and Mail-a-Meal sites.

In 2017, our partner agencies served over 98,000 individuals, nearly 1 in 10 Montanans. MFBN also advocates for strong public policies that reduce hunger and improve economic security. MFBN works on an ongoing basis with legislators, government officials, and the hunger-relief community to make ending hunger in Montana a priority.

Voices of Montana: Stories of Hunger and Hope shares the stories of real Montanans who are experiencing food insecurity. It is crucial that we hear, respect, and learn from these voices in our fight to end hunger. We hope that the honesty and resiliency evident in these stories will dispel myths about hunger and encourage you to become an advocate. The voices within this booklet could be your family members, neighbors, coworkers, and friends.



What is Hunger? What is Food Insecurity?

The technical term for hunger is **food insecurity**. Households that are food insecure face reduced quality, variety, and desirability of their food. Households that have very low food security includes a member who faces disrupted diets or must reduce their food intake because there is not enough money for food.

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1.

Families with Children

One in six, or 38,810 Montana children live in food insecure households. Unfortunately, for children, food insecurity has negative lifelong impacts on physical growth, cognitive development, and ability for memory, language, motor skills and social interaction.

Working to Provide... **Deston, Great Falls**



Soon to be a father, Deston works part-time and would like to get a second job. While things are still hard his circumstances have improved since last winter, "I lived in my car the entire winter. It was difficult because it was hard to keep warm and get food." To prepare for his baby, Deston is visiting the food pantry and hoping to qualify for SNAP, "I want to get by without the program, but it's a difficult time for me. Anything helps even if it's \$20." ■

Finding a Home... **Julie, Cut Bank**



Currently homeless, Julie is a mother of three and moves between her family's homes to keep a roof over their heads, "I need to find a home, so I can cook in my own house and my kids can grab food from their own refrigerator." Summer is the hardest time of the year for her family, "During the school year at least I know my kids are being fed at school." She relies on the food pantry and SNAP for food, especially during summer, "SNAP puts food on our table. We wouldn't have food without SNAP." ■

Multi-Generational Support... **Becky, Cora & Jeff, Valley View**

Becky's property sits on a hill with open land for their ducks, geese, and a small garden that she hopes to expand, "we're trying to work at it, learning how to get the soil better." This year Becky and her grown daughter, Cora, grew peas, potatoes, tomatoes and strawberries. Cora rents part of Becky's house with her husband, Jeff, and their three children. Together this multi-generational household is working together to fend off food insecurity.

Cora and Jeff have faced health issues that disrupted their ability to access food. When these challenges arose they utilized SNAP. Jeff, a veteran, grapples with PTSD, "I've been overseas twice. When I got back, I was not in the best place to work, so we joined SNAP. SNAP made it a lot easier, less worry and stress in our life. Even when we were short on money, we weren't hurting too bad on food because of SNAP." Jeff still serves in the National Guard and works part-time in Polson. Cora shared, "the job has given him a sense of purpose and motivated him to take better care of himself."



For Cora, "I have a genetic collagen disorder, so my joints come out of place whenever they please. I'm just in pain a lot." Also lacking a GED or high school diploma, Cora has difficulty finding steady employment, but she harnesses her cooking skills to provide for the family, "Last year my daughter wanted to play soccer, so every Saturday I sold baked goods at the flea market. I needed to buy shoes for the kids, so I sold apple butter at holiday bazaars."

Families with Children

To ensure all children have the food they need to thrive, we must strengthen federal nutrition programs including SNAP, WIC, School Meal programs, and the Summer Food Service Program.

She also volunteers, which helped her build relationships with farmers and others that allow her to glean, “I helped a man harvest his garden, which had more than he could handle. We got corn, zucchini and kale.”

The family visits their nearby food pantry to supplement their food, noting the selection is “nice because it’s not the exact same things every month.” Jeff also has a service dog, so “it really helps that the food pantry gives dog food.” This past summer, Cora and Jeff also utilized the Double SNAP Dollars program at Polson’s farmers’ market, “You swipe your SNAP card at the booth and they match up to \$10 in produce purchases. I know that by buying from farmers, I’m putting food on their table too.”

Becky recently began experiencing a host of health issues, including neuropathy in her hand and gallbladder issues, “Because I’ve been sick, I am missing work. I’m visiting the doctor and going to physical therapy every week. So far, I’ve had the money to cover my \$25 copays, but I don’t know for how much longer.” With these medical costs the family had to cancel their internet, which created new difficulties. For Becky, “I needed to complete a short-term disability form for my job, but I couldn’t print and fill out the documents.” Cora’s job search stalled, “When I found a job listing, I couldn’t complete the application. Luckily, I was able to go to Job Service, but having internet would have saved on gas money.”

Cora shared her thoughts on food insecurity in Montana, “For anyone that doesn’t recognize there is a problem, you just have to look.” Becky added, “I think when you’ve had what you needed all the time, you assume that’s what everybody has, or if they don’t, then it’s their fault. It’s not our fault, it’s just our circumstances.”

Fortunately, Becky recently learned her employer will cover the majority of her deductible, so she can afford gallbladder surgery. Jeff is excited to begin working twice as many hours after receiving a positive job review, and Cora will teach her daughter’s classmates how to craft for a fundraising bazaar. ■

2.

Families and Communities Needed... **Allen, Cut Bank**

Seniors & Fixed Incomes

Eight percent of Montana seniors live in poverty, and their fixed income leaves many to choose between food and other necessities. Food insecure seniors are more likely to experience negative health outcomes including depression, heart disease, diabetes, weight loss, and more.

Shortly before our interview at the Harvest Food Pantry in Cut Bank, Allen had just returned from his family's two-day cattle drive from East Glacier to Badger-Two Medicine, "We had twenty-six people out there helping, some riding bareback on horses and some on four-wheelers. The moms and aunties had been cooking up a storm, so after a long day, when we were all dusty and dirty, we sat down for a big family meal." This event reveals the importance of family in Allen's story, because their communal support helps him get by each month.

Allen is fortunate to get help from his family, "I think my cousin down the road knows my situation, because they invite me to dinner four times a week." Without his family's support, Allen could only afford the bare minimum on Social Security, "I would pay my bills for a roof over my head and have my kitties. I expected Social Security to cover my life like it did for my parents. I paid into Social Security and Medicare since I was 16 years old, but costs are too high today."

Allen's basic costs each month are nearly \$1,000, more than he can cover with his limited Social Security benefits. So, even though Allen has heart disease and diabetes, he works odd jobs to make up the difference, "I get all my bills paid right off the bat, which leaves me with enough for gas and things you can't get from the food pantry like dish washing soap, toilet paper and tissues. I have \$15 in my bank account right now, but I just finished up some fencing for a friend. And, this week I'll be ranch sitting for my cousins and good friends. They'll likely pay me enough to get me through the end of next month."



Margaret, Great Falls

For most of his food, Allen relies on FDIPIR (Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations), hunting, and the food pantry, which he visits once a week. He loves the food pantry because it is a valuable resource for the community, “I appreciate just knowing that the food pantry is there for people in need. Many people in Montana do seasonal work and in the winters we have the pantry.”

In order for Allen to afford electricity, he has to stretch the assistance he receives through LIEAP (Low Income Energy Assistance Program) all year, “In the winter, I only warm up the kitchen and living room. I’ll turn it down to 40 when I leave the house to keep everything from freezing. I have warm sweaters and pullovers to stay warm.”

When asked what would help improve his situation, Allen offered a realistic response, “Social Security hasn’t kept up with the cost of living, but unfortunately I don’t see Social Security amount rising.” Allen worries about the situation for others, “Yes, jobs have been created, but are those jobs that you can retire on? With possible cuts to Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security, how are people going to make it?”

Allen recognizes that those struggling with food insecurity in our state often lack communal support like him, “It’s so unfortunate that others don’t have a support system like me. Some people give up, like our youth who have no one to turn to and take their own lives before their lives have even started.” He believes our communities can provide this support, “We should not turn our noses up at anyone, poor or rich. A lot of people who are privileged volunteer their money and food without recognition. Working people who might not have a whole lot give their time to helping others like teaching dance classes, coaching and tutoring children. And, I see the poorest being the most giving and kind. I think we all should treat others how we would like to be treated.” ■

Living alone at age 70, Margaret must get by on less than \$800 from Social Security, “I’ve lost over 50 lbs in six months because I haven’t had enough food or the right food for my diabetes. I like SNAP because it’s extra money to buy vegetables and meats.” She also relies on family, “When I can’t afford \$45 for my prescriptions, I have to ask my family to pay. Sometimes I feel guilty because my kids give me this and that when I know they need it also.”



Surviving on a Fixed Income... **LeDoux & Robert, Missoula**



At their home overlooking the Clark Fork River, LeDoux, a retiree in her mid-seventies, and her husband Robert, a veteran in his early eighties, toured their impressive garden of cherries, grapes and vegetables, “In the summer, we grow and preserve as much of our food as possible.” Yet, they enjoy sharing their harvest, as LeDoux explained, “I was raised to always have something left over to give away to friends who may need it. That’s the way it was on the homestead in Eastern Montana, everybody helped everybody else.”

Their hardship exemplifies difficulties older Americans face when living on a fixed income. Robert shared, “Our regular income from Social Security and my small state pension goes to paying for this house, mortgage, power, water, garbage and sewer. We don’t have much leftover.” LeDoux planned to have a larger retirement, but she lost her business and pension because of a divorce, “I thought this could never happen to me but it did.”

Robert recently lost his part-time job at a local university where he had worked for 35 years, most recently as a dance class musical accompanist. This income had provided a necessary supplement for basic expenses,

“I need to find another way to generate a few hundred bucks a month, but who wants to hire an 82 year old. Age discrimination happens.” Because of their backgrounds teaching at Montana universities, LeDoux shared, “We would like to teach, not work as a greeter at a store, which probably wouldn’t bring in much money anyway.” Undeterred, Robert is compiling his music and plans to find unique opportunities to perform.

The couple receives SNAP, which not only provides adequate food, but also as Robert explained, “SNAP helps free up a little bit of money to buy other ordinary human requirements like dish soap and toilet paper.” They began using SNAP a few years ago when they struggled to meet living costs.

LeDoux shared, “All my life I’ve been an advocate of people claiming assistance if they need it. When we had to cut back and couldn’t afford adequate groceries, I had to practice what I preached.”

Unfortunately, last summer a clerical error delayed their SNAP benefits. At the time, LeDoux was recovering from an operation and her insurance failed to cover a prescription, so she had to contemplate, “whether to get medicine or put food on the table.” Luckily, the pharmacy allowed her to make partial payments, and they are now back on SNAP.

SNAP provides a safety net for our seniors, who may have faced difficulties that upended their retirement planning or who cannot keep up with a rising cost of living on a fixed income. LeDoux suggests others attempt to live on a fixed income for a while, “You may live within the budget, but eventually the vehicle that you maintained so faithfully will need repairs and you may not have enough, so you’ll drive on bald tires in the winter or cut back on heating. I don’t think any of this should be happening. It doesn’t need to be happening.” Robert concisely summarized this point, “In the richest country in the world, nobody should be hungry.”

LeDoux believes supporting those who are struggling will benefit the community as much as the individual, “When you feel somewhat secure in your home and with food, medical care and your health, you also feel like you have something to give to others. I think that’s what we desperately need to build communities. It’s a sense of security for all people.” ■

Living on a fixed income at age 85, Walter utilizes public assistance to get by, “All my money goes to bills, and then I’m broke.

The only food I have is from the pantry and \$50 in SNAP.” LIEAP (Low Income Energy Assistance Program) also helps but last year, “I signed up for LIEAP too late, so I had to cut my own wood, because I couldn’t afford propane.”

Seniors & Fixed Incomes

To address senior food insecurity, we must increase access to food assistance programs, including SNAP, Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP), and Congregate and Home Delivered Meal Programs, as well as to affordable housing, health care, and transportation.

3.

Disabled & Vulnerable

One quarter of disabled Montanans aged 18 to 64 live in poverty. Disability increases the risk of food insecurity because it raises expenses and makes it harder for disabled people and their caregivers to work. Insufficient food or a low-quality diet only worsens disabling or chronic health conditions.

This is the Reality... **Debbie, Pablo**



At the Ronan food pantry, Debbie arrived to pick up her monthly food box. She shared her journey of professional achievement cut short by a fall that left her disabled. Now, 57 years old with her children grown, she only cares for herself, but nearly all of her fixed income goes to rent, transportation and utilities. Her story is one of extreme hunger in Montana caused by disability.

Debbie's once successful career began when she enrolled at a local tribal college as a single mother and nontraditional student. Although she struggled academically as a child, Debbie not only achieved a Bachelor's degree, but also completed a Master's program in Education. She returned to the tribal college as an instructor, "I came full circle. I worked my way off of welfare and paid taxes."

Unfortunately, she suffered a fall that left her with a traumatic brain injury, "Now, I have a hard time speaking in complete sentences. It's just difficult after you've

worked all your life. I used to be able to go get a job anywhere. I've always been a person who worked, but I'm not physically able to do that anymore." Debbie now relies on Social Security Disability Income (SSDI), which barely covers rent, utilities and transportation, "I get my SSDI on the 3rd and usually by the 8th I'm down to maybe 10 to 12 bucks. I'm one check away from becoming homeless."

Conley, West Yellowstone

Her only food sources are the monthly FDPIR (Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservation) boxes and her local food pantry. Yet, she finds herself reducing portion sizes and even skipping meals on a weekly basis, “Two weeks ago I was down to just cans of green beans, which I had to eat for four days. It’s a pride thing. I don’t like to tell others what I go through, but I do have friends that know and they’ll feed me. I have neighbors across the street that bring me food on holidays.”

Given Debbie’s limited income, the higher costs at grocery stores worry her, “I don’t go to the grocery store, because it’s too expensive. I can’t afford a three dollar loaf of bread.” As a result, fresh, healthy options are often limited, “My doctor told me to diet, because I’m overweight and diabetic. Sometimes the commodities have fresh options but I also get a lot of pasta and canned fruits and vegetables.” Debbie appreciates when the boxes include traditional food from her tribe like wild rice and berries, which come every two or three months.

Despite her injury, Debbie appreciates her life, “I’ve come to grips with my disability, because I’m alive. I still have my friends, family and great sense of humor. But, I wish I could still work so I could afford to buy more food and stuff for my grandkids like nail polish or a transformer.” Looking to her future, Debbie hopes “that I can make a positive impact in someone’s life, like I did when I taught. I miss that a lot.” She wants her story to be a testimony, “This is what’s happening out here, this is the reality of it.” ■

A veteran, Conley struggles with disabilities, including autism and an amputated limb, yet his disability benefits and Supplemental Security Income fail to cover living costs in West Yellowstone, “I’m living in a tent. I’ve been homeless for a few weeks.

This is the land of plenty, yet I go to the dumpster for food.” He only receives the minimum for SNAP, but even that helps, “I eat rice and beans for most meals, but if I don’t watch my diet, I can’t get up and down. With SNAP, I have gotten to eat fish.”



Hand-Up, Not a Hand-Out... **Ken, Wyola**

Ken arrived at the Hardin food pantry to pick up his monthly senior commodity box, a mixture of canned products, dry goods and a gallon-sized bag of cubed cheese. He drove 50 miles from Wyola, a town on the Crow Reservation that is closer to Wyoming than Hardin, for food that would help his family get through the month.

Fortunately, Ken's health was good enough that day to run errands, because his disability often interrupts his day-to-day activities, "I can't tell from one day to the next how my health will be, tomorrow I could do almost anything or I could barely make it to the bathroom." He became disabled at a young age in the line of duty, "I used to be a police officer, but I got hurt on the job when someone ran me over with a car."

Ken's household relies on his monthly disability payment of \$750, so any unexpected costs can dramatically reduce their security. Ken recently had to get new tires for his car, "it basically broke me. We have to have transportation, because we are 13 miles away from the nearest store and I have a heart condition so I have to be able to get to the hospital in Sheridan, Wyoming."

Despite his age of 61, Ken talks about how a job would improve his economic security but, as he puts it, "I can't go to an employer and say I don't feel good today, I'm not coming in. It just doesn't work like that. So, I'm not able to hold down a job."

Not having enough food has physical and emotional impacts, "Believe me when you're trying to think about feeding your family, a lot of things go through your mind, depression is one of them. It gets me depressed sometimes because I feel like I'm failing."



Ken hunts as much as his disability allows, “All I have to buy are gas and bullets. My tribe usually allows disabled members to hunt one buffalo a year, but I wasn’t able to go this year, because my back was acting up. When you’re healthy, it’s no big deal to gut, skin and haul game from where you shot it, but when you’re handicapped, it’s a lot harder. Sometimes if you don’t hunt, then you don’t have meat.”

Ken has stayed in Wyola because of his family and community, “Life on the reservation can be a little bit hard, but I love living in Wyola because of the people, the community. A lot of my grandchildren are all in this area. This is the reason why I stayed. I don’t have the desire to leave.”

Addressing the stigma against those who are struggling, Ken shared, “We are humans just like everybody else, but sometimes we go through tough times. It doesn’t make us bad or lazy or dumb. The majority of us know how to pull ourselves up by the boot straps, so to speak, and we’re not looking for a handout, we’re looking for a hand-up.”

For the future, he hopes “to see my family and all the people in our tribe living happy lives without having to worry if their lights will be shut off or if they will be evicted tomorrow, because I know people who live like that.” He also added, “There’s an old country song that says always be humble and kind. I would like my children to be that way.” ■

At 61 years old, Cal lives with degenerative diseases that require costly care, “Dillon doesn’t have specialists, so I go to Bozeman, 150 miles away. Just to come get food at the pantry, it costs \$25 in gas. We need better health care, better access to medical care. Health effects employment and economies. The government thinks it only impacts the individual but it impacts everything. We need a healthy, educated workforce for the good of our country.”



Disabled & Vulnerable

To care for our neighbors with disabilities, we must strengthen Supplemental Security Income, Social Security Disability Insurance, Medicaid, and Medicare to provide adequate medical coverage and benefit amounts. We must also insure all Montanans have access to sufficient, nutritious food by protecting SNAP.

4.

Working Poor

Although Montana's 2017 unemployment rate was 4%, unemployment varied significantly by county, reaching 20% on the Crow Reservation. Regarding underemployment, nearly 1 in 4 Montana workers earn \$1250 or less per month. Montana also has a high share of part-time jobs, with only 32.9 hours worked per week per job, tied for lowest in the nation.

Moving Beyond a Felony... **Brandon, Kila**

Brandon lives 5 miles from the center of Kila and 20 miles from Kalispell, up twisting dirt roads in an old trailer owned by his mother. He lives modestly with no cable or internet, only his hundreds of books collected from thrift stores over the years and his cats responsible for catching the mice from the woods. His story shows how difficult finding steady work can be and how important nutrition programs are during hard times.

Since leaving college in 2013, Brandon struggled to find steady employment despite his best effort to move beyond a past felony. He shared, "I applied for over 100 jobs in Kalispell, but no one would hire me. I have a felony on my record, so I guess that means I'm not deserving of employment. I remember filling out an application in a big department store at a kiosk, and when I got down to the question 'have you ever been convicted of a felony?', I clicked yes, and it said 'thank you for applying, you're qualifications don't meet our needs.'"

Finding a job is not a simple task, "People think that just because there's a 'now hiring' sign in the window and jobs at Job Service, anyone should be able to get a job, so 'why don't you have a job, you loser?' Well, there's a hundred places hiring, but 50 of them want a college degree or require two to ten years of experience, and probably 75 of them don't hire felons. Out of the hundred jobs, I might be qualified for only three of them but they don't hire felons, or want five years' experience. And, a job listed at Job Service might be in Polson or Ronan. Even if I got the 12 dollar an hour job, I couldn't afford the gas and my car is not reliable enough to drive to Polson every day."



While looking for a job, Brandon shared, “SNAP was my only means of survival. Without SNAP, I wouldn’t have been able to afford to eat.” However, the amount of SNAP benefits he received was not enough to get him through the month, “I also visited the food pantry at least once a month.”

Brandon recently secured a part-time job at a fast food restaurant. While he no longer visits the pantry, he still struggles to afford quality food, “It’s definitely cheaper to eat unhealthy than it is to eat healthy. I can buy a frozen meal for \$2.99, a bag of frozen peas and two packets of those \$1 mashed potatoes that you just add water and boil. I spend \$6 and that can feed me for three days.”

Although living in his mom’s trailer allows Brandon to stretch his income from his new job, poor conditions of his car and home present financial uncertainty. The trailer lacks insulation leading to higher electric bills and, “the windows leak. I have to put a towel in the bathroom windowsill to stop the water from coming in or else it gets moldy.” Repeated transportation issues present challenges for work, “It takes three to four hours to walk from my house to town. When my van broke down a year ago, I used my brother’s truck, but it leaked transmission fluid, the heater didn’t work, and there was no windshield washer reservoir.” The truck died when Brandon started his new job, which is 19 miles away, four days a week. So, he borrowed money to buy a used car, “When I first got the car, it was overheating. I had to change the thermostat and sensor. Now it works fine, knock on wood.”

Brandon ended the interview with a smile, hopeful that things will get easier, because finally someone realized he deserves employment. ■

Mary is a veteran who works part-time while helping to care for her family, “My sister and her grandkids are staying with me. Housing is expensive here and there is not much available. We have a two bedroom house with five people. I’ve never been one to ask for help but I have a tough time affording gas just to get to work. In the winter, extra bills mean less money for everything else. I also try to help others so that leaves me short.”

Unexpected Medical Condition... **Kurt, Dillon**



Kurt moved to Dillon from his hometown, Townsend, to find a job. As the most populous town in Beaverhead County, finding a job in Dillon seemed easy enough, but last winter Kurt faced an unforeseen health issue that left him food insecure.

One day while cutting meat at a butcher shop, Kurt became very ill. He thought he had the flu, instead he needed his gallstones removed. Although the procedure should've taken a day, numerous complications led to multiple surgeries, "I lost 35lbs. It was a miserable experience, a four month deal. So, it was really hard to get to work. When I did get to work, I didn't feel good."

During this time, he and his girlfriend struggled to put food on the table, "Once or twice a week, we ate top ramen or macaroni with butter on it. We weren't getting full, nutritious meals." Then, while cleaning motel rooms, his girlfriend learned about Beaverhead Community Food Pantry, which became their primary food source that winter, "If it wouldn't have been for the pantry, we probably would have starved."

Kurt received SNAP when his health problems began, but while "renewing our benefits, the office in Dillon closed. We mailed our application to Butte, but evidently they didn't receive it.

We had to reapply, but getting to Butte is a hassle. We had a reliable car but no cash for gas. I borrowed money for just enough gas to get to medical appointments. Medical treatment was most important at the time. So, we decided to make it on food from the pantry."

Fortunately, with the help of Dillon's food pantry, Kurt made it through the tough times, "You do what you got to do. We're not extravagant by any means." A month after his last surgery, Kurt began working. This summer, he sprayed weeds for ten hours a day, six days a week, "We will try to save up for the winter." ■

Waiting for a Job... **Kandi**, Absarokee

We met Kandi as she picked up a food box at a church in Absarokee, where she had received food for five months, while waiting to begin a new job. Her story is one of strength in overcoming adversity and hope for a better future.

Last year, Kandi moved to Absarokee after suffering a brain injury from a violent crime. The impact of the event shattered her life, “Before all this happened, I always worked full-time. I was in law enforcement for three years and an EMT. I paid my bills and cared for my children, but sometimes something happens that erases everything. So, even though I’m technically 40 years old, I’m more like one.”

In a profound moment of hunger, “I stood on a corner with a sign asking for money because I was so hungry. I never pictured myself in that spot. People may think others did something wrong to be in that position, but in that moment I was a broken person. I held the sign and hoped someone would help. Eventually, I found a soup kitchen.”

She believes those without personal experience with food insecurity may struggle to comprehend how hunger occurs, “because like me, I worked my whole life, so it’s hard to get to a point of compassion.” But, one unimaginable event changed her life and perspective, “There’s no such thing as surviving traumatic events. You’re not the same person. You’re a human shell trying get back up on your feet.”

Now, she is starting anew, “The only way for me to have a life was to walk away from everything. So, here I am in this small town, and I made it.” Kandi is especially thankful for the church’s food boxes, because “sometimes you need a little help from the community and kindness from others.” ■



Working Poor

Too many jobs in our state provide low pay, have unpredictable schedules, and lack key benefits such as paid sick leave, leaving many workers vulnerable to food insecurity. We must support policies that strengthen work and programs such as SNAP that help workers make up the different.

First Lady **Lisa Bullock**

“I am honored to lend my voice to the Montana Food Bank Network’s dedicated efforts to end hunger in Montana. Hunger affects approximately one in eight Montanans.

When kids don’t get enough to eat, they have trouble succeeding in the classroom. Hardworking parents are forced to choose between paying the power bill and providing a healthy dinner. Seniors experiencing food insecurity are more likely to get sick and spend time in the hospital. Each day, too many of our friends and neighbors wonder where they’ll get their next meal.

The Montana Food Bank Network partners with over 280 local partners across Big Sky Country to reduce hunger in our communities. Because of their remarkable work, more individuals and families across the state have reliable access to healthy food options.

The stories shared here are from people of all backgrounds and circumstances—they are our friends, neighbors, classmates, and coworkers. By addressing hunger, we are making this a better place for everyone who calls Montana home. ”



– **Lisa Bullock**, First Lady of Montana

Get Involved!

Voices of Montana:

Stories
of **Hunger**
& **Hope**

1. Advocate.

Your voice is powerful and combined with other Montanans can make a huge difference. Federal nutrition programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), School Meals, WIC, the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), and the senior nutrition programs are crucial resources for people across our state. Urge our state and federal policy makers to invest in and strengthen these nutrition programs, while supporting effective job training programs and access to affordable education, childcare, healthcare, and housing. To join the Montana Food Bank Network in anti-hunger advocacy, **text MFBN to 52886**

2. Educate.

Use what you have learned from the stories in *Voices of Montana* to address myths about hunger in your community. Learn more about the programs focused on reducing poverty and food insecurity in your area, and find out how you can help support their work. Increased awareness and understanding of the issue of hunger is the first step towards action.

3. Donate.

Your support is critical to the organizations fighting hunger in your community. Whether you choose to volunteer your time, make a monetary contribution, or host a food drive, it all makes a tremendous impact.

For more information on advocacy opportunities, or to connect to partners in your community, go to **mfbn.org**.





Conclusion

We hope that these Montana voices will help to broaden your understanding of food insecurity and the complicated realities that leave people struggling to make ends meet. We also hope that these stories will help to demonstrate the critical role of the food pantries, public food programs, and community organizations that are working around the state to address food insecurity in immediate ways.

The voices featured in this report are just a handful of the nearly 130,000 Montanans living in food insecure homes. Across our state we have parents skipping meals to feed their children, seniors choosing between food and medication, and hardworking individuals going to work every day and still not making enough money to make ends meet. But this doesn't have to be the reality. Hunger is a solvable problem and together we can end it. Our nation, state, and communities must make ending hunger a priority.

To better understand the causes and consequences of hunger in our state, read our **2018 Hungry in Montana** report. This report highlights the findings from more than 200 in-depth interviews, conducted at food pantries around our state. The report examines the underlying factors contributing to the need for food assistance and the ways clients cope with hunger and food insecurity. This report can be found online at www.mfbn.org/research.



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Your hard work and compassion make a tremendous impact on your communities.

- Family Service, Billings
- Helping Hands in Hardin
- Opportunities, Inc., Great Falls
- Libby Food Pantry
- Beaverhead Community Food Pantry, Dillon
- West Yellowstone Food Bank
- Harvest Food Pantry, Cut Bank
- Custer County Food Bank, Miles City
- Ronan Bread Basket

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Voices of Montana:

Stories of Hunger & Hope

The Montana Food Bank Network (MFBN) is Montana's only statewide food bank. MFBN is also the only fully privileged Montana member of *Feeding America*, the national hunger fighting organization. Our mission is to end hunger in Montana through food acquisition and distribution, education and advocacy.

To learn more or to make a donation, visit www.mfbn.org



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