

## Breanna & Melissa, THOMPSON FALLS

Breanna and her mom, Melissa, live in an apartment with their dog, where Breanna is her mom's home healthcare giver. "Life is definitely a lot different than before COVID," Breanna noted. When COVID-19 came to Montana and shutdowns began in March, she was unable to see family or friends in person, including her son, who is in foster care.

Breanna explained that things were especially difficult at the beginning of the pandemic when everyone was told to stock up on household supplies. "Everyone went through panic buying, but it's harder for families that need those supplies but can't buy in bulk." Falling gas prices as well as the federal stimulus check helped to cover basic necessities, "Without a steady paycheck, when you get the stimulus check you can get the necessities. It helped so much." But with her mother going through health issues, Breanna says that they have had to be extra careful to avoid contracting COVID-19, which has changed many aspects of their lives. "Everything has gotten a lot harder."

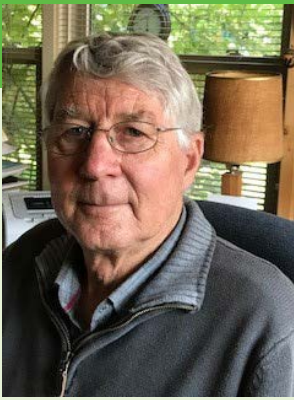
Breanna and Melissa receive SNAP benefits and, for the past few months, have been receiving the maximum allotment because of the pandemic. "I think sometimes lawmakers don't understand how much even \$100 extra helps. I can't even explain how much it helps. If it stopped, we could scrape by, but the extra \$100 makes a difference in not stressing about where food is going to come from when you're already stressing about catching COVID-19." Breanna says that this allows her and her mother to be able to cook at home and eat a healthy meal together at the dinner table, although she wishes healthier foods were more affordable.

When asked if there was anything she thought would be needed to see her household through the pandemic, Breanna shared how important community support was to her and emphasized how important it was for communities to respect the needs of their neighbors and to protect each other. "If you give to someone, it will come in return down the road. We trade food with our neighbors and we have each other's backs."



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## LETTER FROM A MFBN BOARD MEMBER



**Your donation to the Montana Food Bank Network will provide direct support for the food insecure.**

Your donation to the Montana Food Bank Network (MFBN) will provide direct support for efforts to identify and address the impacts that the COVID-19 pandemic is having on food insecurity in the State.

The pandemic has already had some dramatic effects on MFBN's distribution of food to its client agencies and anti-hunger programs. Local food banks and pantries have implemented policies that require social distancing, non-contact expectations, and the use of masks. Congregate feeding sites, so important to seniors for social support and food, have been discontinued. School feeding programs for children have been reduced or restructured.

MFBN'S Policy Department, in collaboration with Feeding America, is presently conducting a COVID-19 Client Impact Survey. Additionally, Feeding America has developed several models

that estimate the impacts that the pandemic might have on food insecurity if levels of poverty and unemployment increase in Montana. Projections from these models are sobering. Findings from the client survey, together with estimates of increasing food insecurity anticipated in the FA models, will allow our Policy Department to inform Montanans about the nature and depth of food insecurity due to the pandemic. MFBN will then be able to enhance its policy-making and it will provide data that will help mitigate food insecurity in the near future.

**MFBN faces some unique challenges. Its mission is to end hunger in Montana. I hope you will be generous in your support of its work.**

Paul Miller,  
Board Member of MFBN.  
Emeritus Professor of Sociology,  
University of Montana

## HOW COVID-19 AND A LITTLE BOX TRUCK "THAT COULD" *Transformed* NORTH VALLEY FOOD BANK

North Valley Food Bank was fortunately already in expansion mode when their communities started to experience the effects of COVID. As a tourist town, Whitefish and the surrounding communities are home to a high proportion of hourly and service industry workers.

Prior to October of 2019, North Valley Food Bank distributed food two hours a week at its facility and delivered rescue food every other Friday to the FAST Blackfeet program, serving a total of about 120 families a week. Knowing that they could do more, North Valley's team added a distribution day and increased to six distribution hours per week.

This April, North Valley Food Bank further increased their response to the growing need for food. They quickly adopted a drive-through distribution model, and expanded their service to 14 hours per week, reserving two hours for elderly and immunocompromised customers. North Valley now serves around 225 families

per week and offers a home delivery service for potentially vulnerable customers, reaching up to 75 households per week.

A survey of North Valley's customers also deepened partnerships with the Flathead and Tobacco Valley Food Banks, furthering their community reaches through new mobile food pantry routes. **The support of a generous donor helped North Valley purchase a "box truck," enabling the food bank to pick up a greater amount of rescue food, deliver weekly food boxes, and help address delivery and storage challenges at Farm Hands and the FAST Blackfeet program.** According to North Valley's Director of Operations, Lauren Jarrold, "The box truck was a game-changer!"

North Valley Food Bank continues to be poised to partner throughout the network to meet the demands of our times.



# UPCOMING *Holiday* SEASON



As this upcoming holiday season is quickly approaching, there are many uncertainties about what it will bring for Montanans this year. MFBN has been preparing for the holidays for months, working hard to ensure that every Montana family has enough food this holiday season. Last year, MFBN distributed over 5,000 turkeys across the state, and this year we're planning for double those numbers. This 2020 holiday season may be missing loved ones around the table, but with your help, families all across Montana will have the food they need to feel the love and support. With all the changes this global pandemic has brought, many things are certain: health and family come first, and our friends and neighbors of MFBN come together to make sure all who need help can receive it. We have endured so many different changes these last eight months that coming together this holiday season, whether in person or in our hearts, is what we all need to end this year.

Your support makes a difference to so many, no matter what time of year, but your support is especially appreciated this holiday season. It's not too late to help friends and neighbors across Montana; without the generosity you have shown over these past eight months, many would be sitting down to a table with very little to be thankful for.

# *Expanded* BENEFITS OUTREACH EFFORTS

2020 has been a year none of us anticipated with the arrival of COVID-19 and its impact on our state. Even prior to COVID, MFBN had noticed a need for greater work helping Montanans access public benefits programs, beyond our current focus on SNAP access. The onset of the pandemic solidified this need and on July 1st, MFBN launched its Benefits Outreach Program. MFBN is excited to launch this new program, which expands the scope of work from SNAP to include applications and referrals to Medicaid, TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families), WIC, new programs such as Pandemic EBT that have emerged as a result of COVID, and more.

MFBN's original SNAP Outreach Program has been around formally since 2016. Outreach Program staff provide over-the-phone assistance to clients who call MFBN's special SNAP Hotline. We also train community partners on the SNAP application process and how they can help clients apply. In addition to these direct service pieces, MFBN conducts statewide outreach for SNAP, letting people know what the program is and how they can apply. The new Benefits Outreach Program, manned by our Benefits Access Specialist, continues to offer these great services but adds other beneficial programs to the mix.

One exciting program is our new partnership with NeighborWorks Montana to assist clients affected by COVID-19 navigate the application for Emergency Housing Assistance. In this partnership, NeighborWorks disperses requests for housing help to its navigators (like MFBN's Benefits Access Specialist), who respond to clients and help guide them through eligibility and the application.

**Growth is good. This program expansion has spotlighted the need for coordinated client services. MFBN is excited to play a bigger role in connecting Montanans to available resources and help them navigate those enrollment systems.**



# MFBN *Advocates* FOR STRONG PUBLIC NUTRITION PROGRAMS

While food pantries and other emergency food providers play a crucial role at the frontlines of our communities, **we need more than food banks to meet the need for food in Montana. The importance of SNAP, school meals, and other public food programs is especially clear as we face the unprecedented challenges of the COVID-19 crisis.**

Montana Food Bank Network (MFBN) leads anti-hunger advocacy efforts across the state, urging support for strong public nutrition programs and policies. Throughout the COVID-19 crisis, we have been working hard to ensure that Congress understands what is happening on the ground, and the importance of providing federal support for SNAP, commodity food programs, and nutrition programs for children and seniors.

We are also gearing up for the 2021 State Legislative Session where we will be defending against attempts to

weaken SNAP, urging support for Double SNAP Dollars, and working with partners to protect social service programs from budget cuts.

**Join us! Sharing your voice is easy and impactful.** Our policymakers need to hear from Montanans from different backgrounds and from all corners of the state. Help us make the issue of hunger in Montana a priority for our policymakers. Montana Food Bank Network will provide all of the support you need to be an advocate, including updates, talking points, and calls to action.

**To join us as an Anti-Hunger Advocate, text MFBN to 52886 or visit our Action Center ([mfbn.org/action-center](https://mfbn.org/action-center)) to learn more about current campaigns and to take action.**



# MFBN *Helps Connect* FAMILIES TO NEW FOOD BENEFIT

As part of their COVID relief efforts, Congress authorized an important new program, Pandemic EBT (P-EBT), to provide food benefits for children that missed out on school meals during the 2019-2020 academic year due to school closures. Families who participated in free and reduced-price school meals as of March 18, 2020, were eligible to receive \$330 per child. The Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services (DPHHS) worked with school districts to automatically enroll about 90% of eligible children and began issuing benefits in late July.

Upon the launch of the P-EBT program, Montana Food Bank Network partnered with DPHHS to conduct a statewide outreach campaign, ensuring that all remaining families knew how and where to apply, ahead of the September 21 deadline. The campaign, launched on September 1, helped more than 2,000 families apply for food benefits. Thanks to grant funding from the Food

Research and Action Center (FRAC), MFBN launched a campaign that included developing and promoting an informational P-EBT website ([montanameals.org](https://montanameals.org)), which links to the P-EBT application. We shared this website on flyers and handouts that were distributed to more than 400 community partners including food pantries, farmers' markets, schools, grocery stores, and other locations serving families across the state. MFBN also conducted an extensive ad campaign including social media, digital, newspaper, and radio ads.

As many Montana schools are operating hybrid models, and families are participating in remote learning opportunities, kids may continue to miss out on school meals, placing families at greater risk of hunger. MFBN is actively advocating for the extension of P-EBT to continue throughout the 2020-2021 school year, ensuring that Montana families continue to have access to this important food program.



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