

Voices of Montana

Stories of Hunger & Hope

2020 COVID-19 Edition



Voices of Montana
Stories of
Hunger & Hope
2020 COVID-19 Edition

COVID-19 changed the landscape of food security as we knew it. Prior to the pandemic, an estimated 109,000 Montanans lived in food insecure homes, facing daily challenges to provide food for their families. As a result of COVID, thousands more were suddenly unemployed and pushed towards poverty, without the resources to weather the crisis. Additionally, COVID accentuated the gaps and limitations of our food system, creating the perfect storm for food insecurity.

The stories you are about to read represent the voices of the 141,000 Montanans who are likely to experience food insecurity in 2020 as a result of the pandemic.

Gayle Carlson - Chief Executive Officer



Introduction

Montana Food Bank Network works to end hunger in Montana through food acquisition and distribution, education and advocacy. We partner with food pantries, meal programs, and other community organizations to help meet the immediate need for food, while also advocating for strong public policies and programs to address hunger and its root causes. The data and stories in this report highlight some of the impacts of COVID-19 on food security in Montana.

COVID-19 created a public health and economic crisis like nothing we have ever faced. In a matter of weeks, tens of thousands of Montanans were laid off or had their hours cut, and grocery store shelves were bare. Food pantries were on the front lines, responding to the needs of their communities, while doing their best to keep staff, volunteers, and the individuals they serve healthy and safe.

In the fight to end hunger in Montana, we all have a role to play and a voice to share. We must work together to support our neighbors, coworkers, family members, and friends, and to help our state recover from this devastating crisis.



Food Insecurity in Montana

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 diet due to lack of money or other resources for food.

Very Low Food Security occurs when households must reduce food intake or skip meals.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, approximately 1 in 10 Montanans lived in a food insecure home. While any level of food insecurity in our state should be unacceptable, this rate was the lowest in Montana since before the start of the Great Recession. Food insecurity in Montana had been following a downward trend since 2011, indicating a slow but positive recovery from the Great Recession.

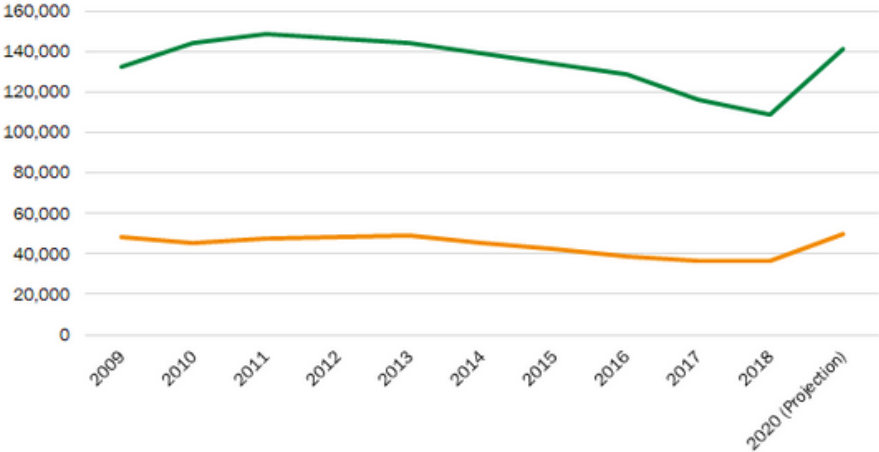
COVID-19 changed everything, undoing much of the progress we had made, seemingly overnight. Using national unemployment and poverty projections, Feeding America estimates that Montana's food insecurity will increase by 29% as a result of the pandemic, with an additional 32,000 Montanans at risk of food insecurity. If these projections are accurate, more than 141,000 Montanans, including nearly 50,000 children, will live in food insecure homes in 2020.

36% Increase
Montana Children Living in Food Insecure Homes in 2020

29% Increase
Montanans Living in Food Insecure Homes in 2020

Food Insecurity Projections:
Feeding America, Map the Meal Gap, 2020 compared to 2018

MONTANANS LIVING IN FOOD INSECURE HOMES



— Individuals in Food Insecure Homes

— Children in Food Insecure Homes

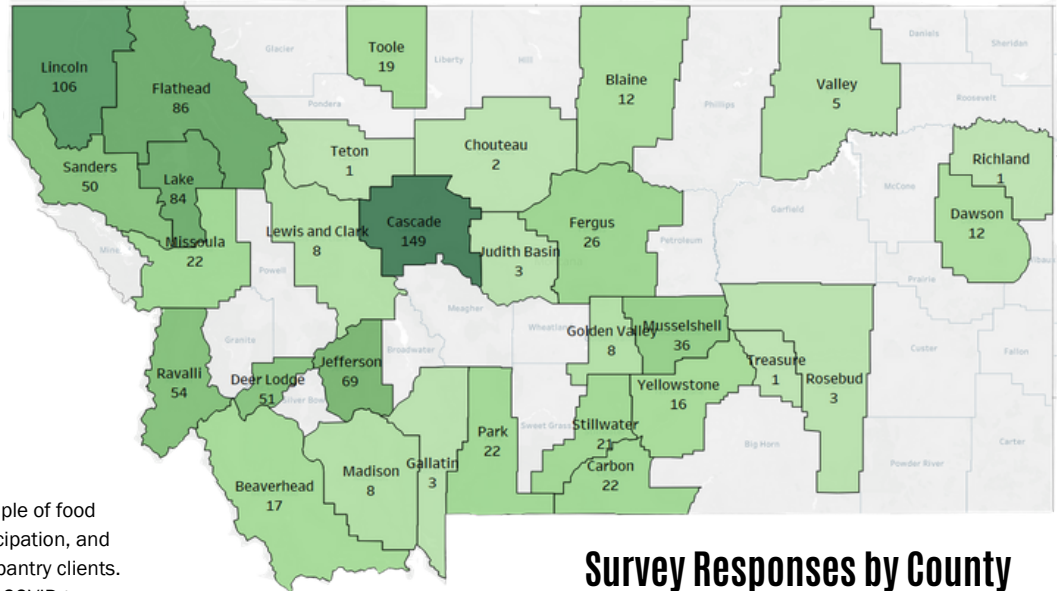


COVID-19 Impact Survey

To better understand the impacts of COVID-19 to food security in Montana, MFBN partnered with Feeding America on their COVID-19 Client Impact Survey.

Nationally, more than 10,500 individuals participated in the survey, including 917 responses from Montana, across 30 counties. The following data represent these 917 responses.

*Note that the survey findings are from a convenience sample of food pantries, programs, and clients that self-selected into participation, and are not representative of the situation of all Montana food pantry clients. Instead, these results provide a snapshot of the impacts of COVID to our state, and an indication of the challenges facing Montana households.



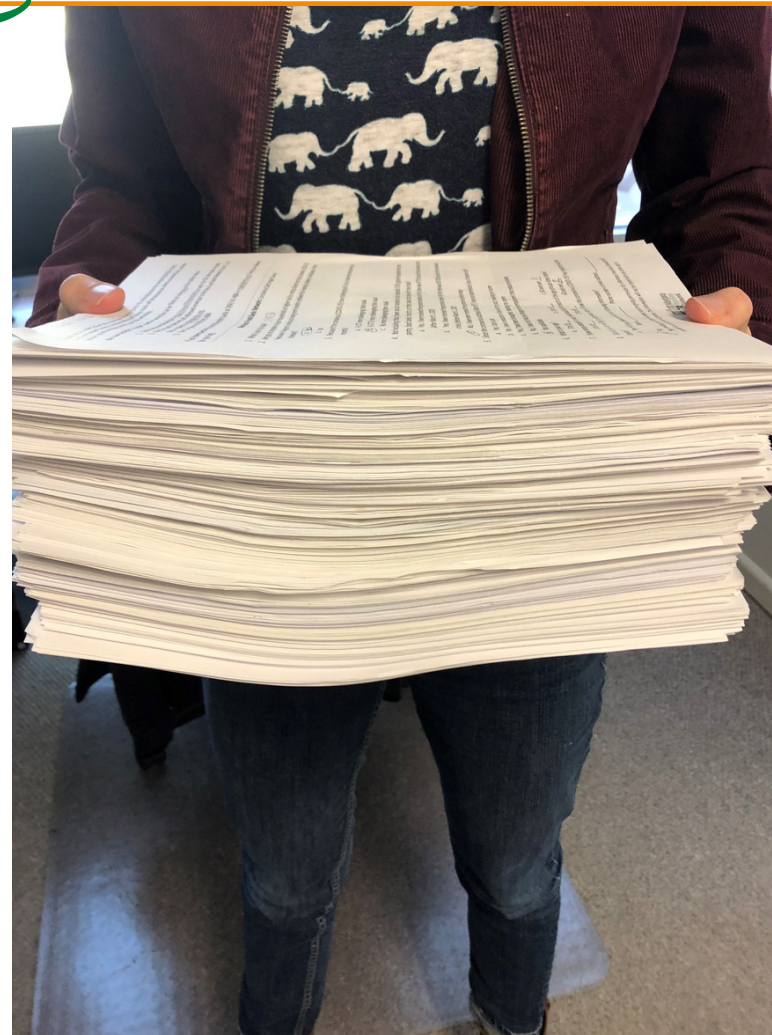
Survey Responses by County

Methodology

Montana Food Bank Network provided survey materials to 135 partner agencies, Backpack Programs, and Mail-A-Meal coordinators. We asked these partners to distribute the one-page survey to the individuals and families participating in their programs and services.

Each agency was able to determine their own survey distribution method, either placing stickers with access to the online questionnaire on food boxes, or providing paper questionnaires to clients. The survey was open for responses from June 15 to July 31, 2020.

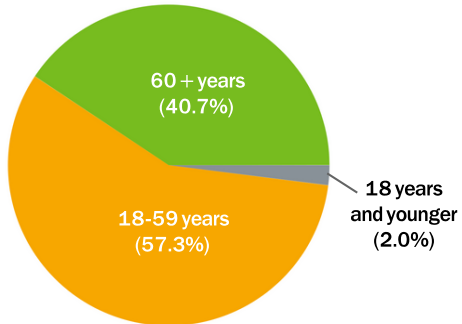
Survey respondents had the option to provide contact information if they would like to share a longer story. Five of these stories are featured in this report, following the survey results.



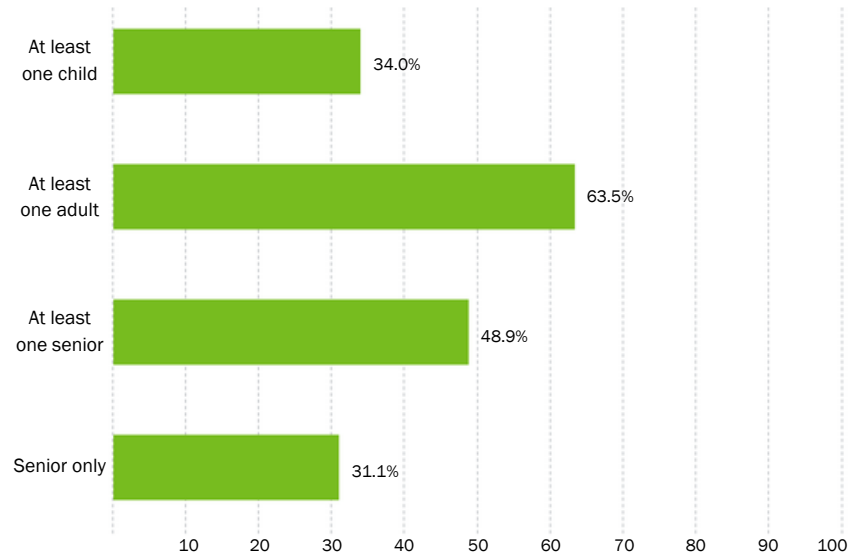
Survey Results

We had a high representation from seniors in our survey results, due to strong participation in the survey from our Mail-A-Meal program partners, and a number of senior centers. Nearly half of all participating households included at least one senior and more than one in three included children.

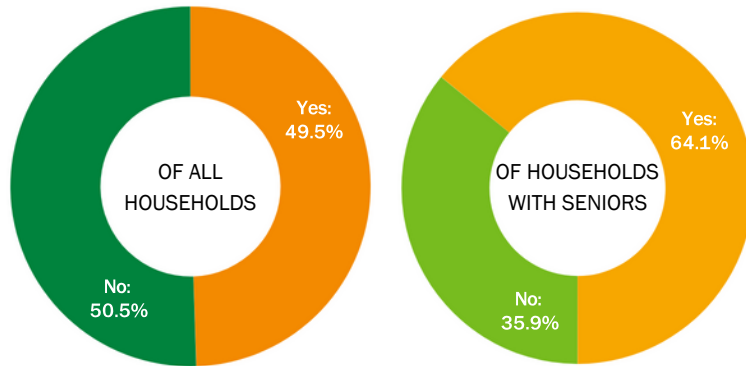
Age of Respondent



Household Demographics



Households with a Member Considered High Risk Due to Age or Health Status



While COVID-19 presents risks to all demographics, those at greatest risk include individuals with compromised immune systems, underlying health issues, or advanced age. Of all households surveyed, nearly half included a member considered at high risk. Of households with seniors, nearly two-thirds reported including a high risk member - although all of these households included someone 60 years of age or older.

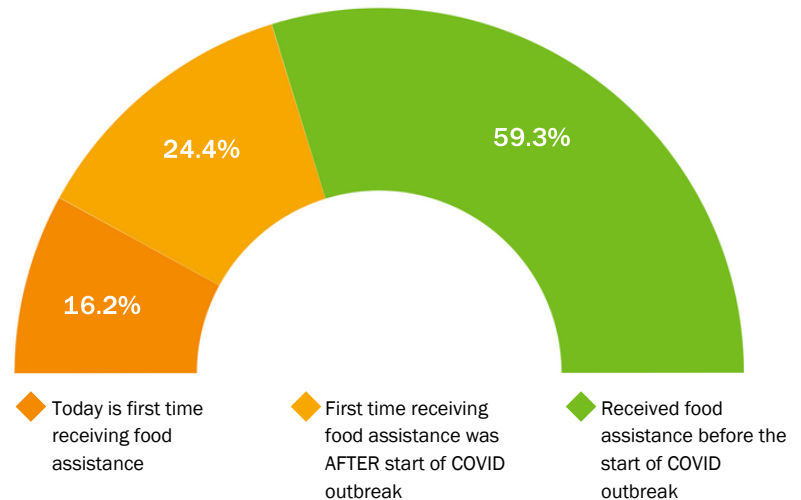


Received Food from Food Pantry or Other Program

Many Montana families found themselves in need of help for the first time as a result of the pandemic. Montana's food pantries were on the front lines, serving thousands of new clients, in addition to those who were already struggling.

While visits to food pantries soared in March and April, food pantries continued to serve many new families throughout the summer and fall.

More than 40 percent of survey respondents reported receiving food for the first time after the start of the pandemic, including 16 percent (or 149 households) receiving food assistance for the first time on the day of the survey.



A photograph of a rural landscape. In the foreground, there is a field of dry, yellowish-brown grass. A wooden fence post is visible on the right side. In the background, there are trees and a cloudy sky. The text is overlaid on the image.

“I receive Social Security but it does not begin to cover my needs. I have family that helps. COVID-19 for older people specifically, has terrified us. We stay home and food is a big concern. Budgets are already stressed and the emotional stress of isolation and worry is very difficult to deal with.”

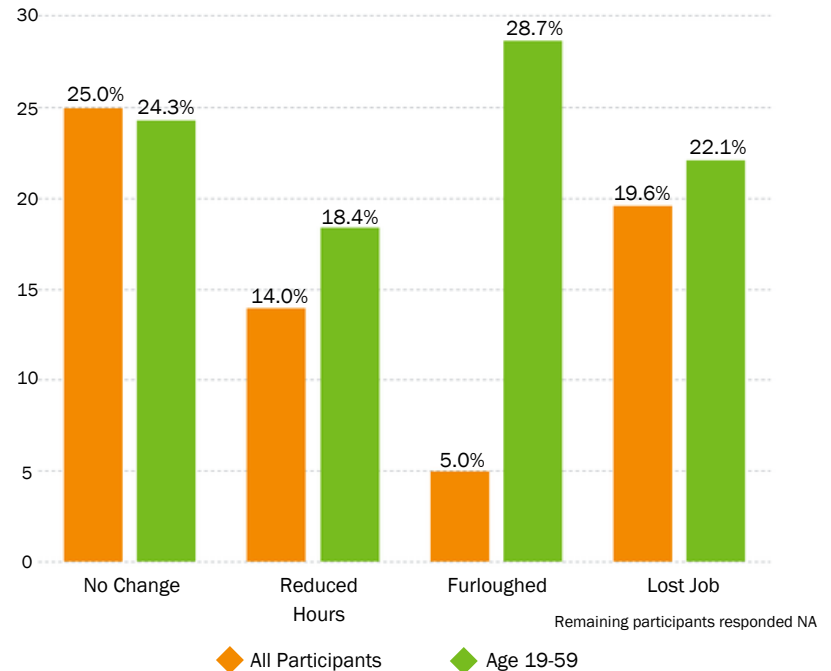
Food Pantry Client - Flathead County

Loss of Job or Income Since COVID-19 Outbreak

Beyond the public health crisis, COVID-19 created an economic crisis, as people stay home and businesses reduce capacity or close entirely to keep their staff and customers safe.

Following Montana's initial shutdown, tens of thousands of Montanans filed for unemployment insurance in a matter of weeks. In Montana, unemployment claims went from approximately 12,000 people per week in February to five times that level during the peak week of claims in April (2020 Montana Labor Day Report).

While unemployment rates have declined significantly since the peak in April, job losses remain severe in Montana's hospitality and retail sectors.



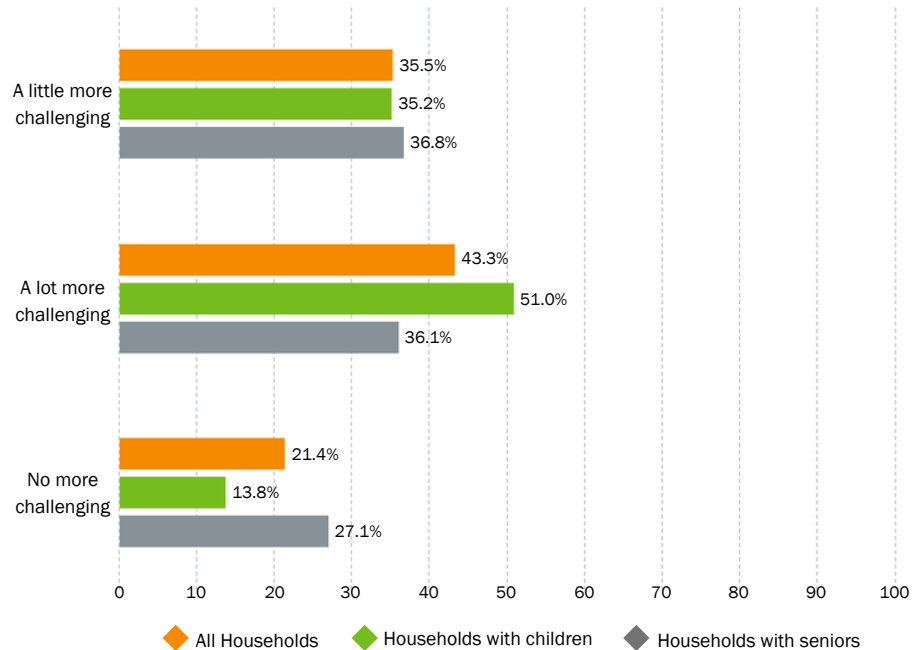
Challenge Making Ends Meet Over Next 3 Months

Due to COVID-19

The effects of COVID-19 will likely be felt for months, and even years to come. The majority of survey respondents anticipated increased hardship in the months ahead.

Overall, nearly 80 percent of households expected it will be more difficult to make ends meet over the next three months due to COVID-19. More than 40 percent expected it to be a lot more challenging to make ends meet.

Households with children anticipated the greatest challenge, with 51 percent reporting that the next three months would be a lot more challenging.



Angel - Helena

“SNAP means a lot, that we are actually able to eat, but we still have to make it stretch for the bare necessities.”



“The stimulus check helped us get back on track, and we get \$190 in SNAP instead of \$16 right now, but we only get SNAP for my mom.” Angel, who lives in Helena with her mom, explains that she recently lost her SNAP benefits. Because she is taking care of her mom, who is waiting for a knee replacement and is at an increased risk of COVID-19, Angel is unable to work, meaning that their total income is from her mom’s Social Security, with rent and bills to pay.

Angel notes that since the pandemic began, the Salvation Army in Helena has been helpful with providing meals and they can now access the Helena Food Share twice a month instead of once, but “it takes a lot to visit the Food Share. We don’t drive so I have to ride the bus, but they haven’t been running as usual with COVID.” She says that “it’s pretty hard to do anything about food, but we usually make do with what we have, so we’re doing the same thing now. We take turns passing on meals so the other can eat.”

One thing that has helped during the pandemic has been the produce [Farmers to Families] box that her mother received. Angel says that it has “meant the world to her.” Her mother has diabetes and the produce boxes have made it easier for their household to eat healthier.

“In all honesty, the crisis seems to be better for us [with extra assistance], but we’re waiting for it to go back to the way it was before and losing the help we’ve had since COVID started.” Their household receives SNAP benefits and she says that SNAP means a lot, “we’re actually able to eat, but we still have to make it stretch for the bare necessities.” Angel, when asked if there was anything she wants lawmakers to know about the importance of SNAP for her family, says “[I would want them to know] the fact that people live off of it. For me and my mom, that is basically our meal. It is what we live off of month to month.”

Food Pantry Client - Lake County

“Early on it became a struggle to buy food. The food available for me in the store went from little to almost none.”



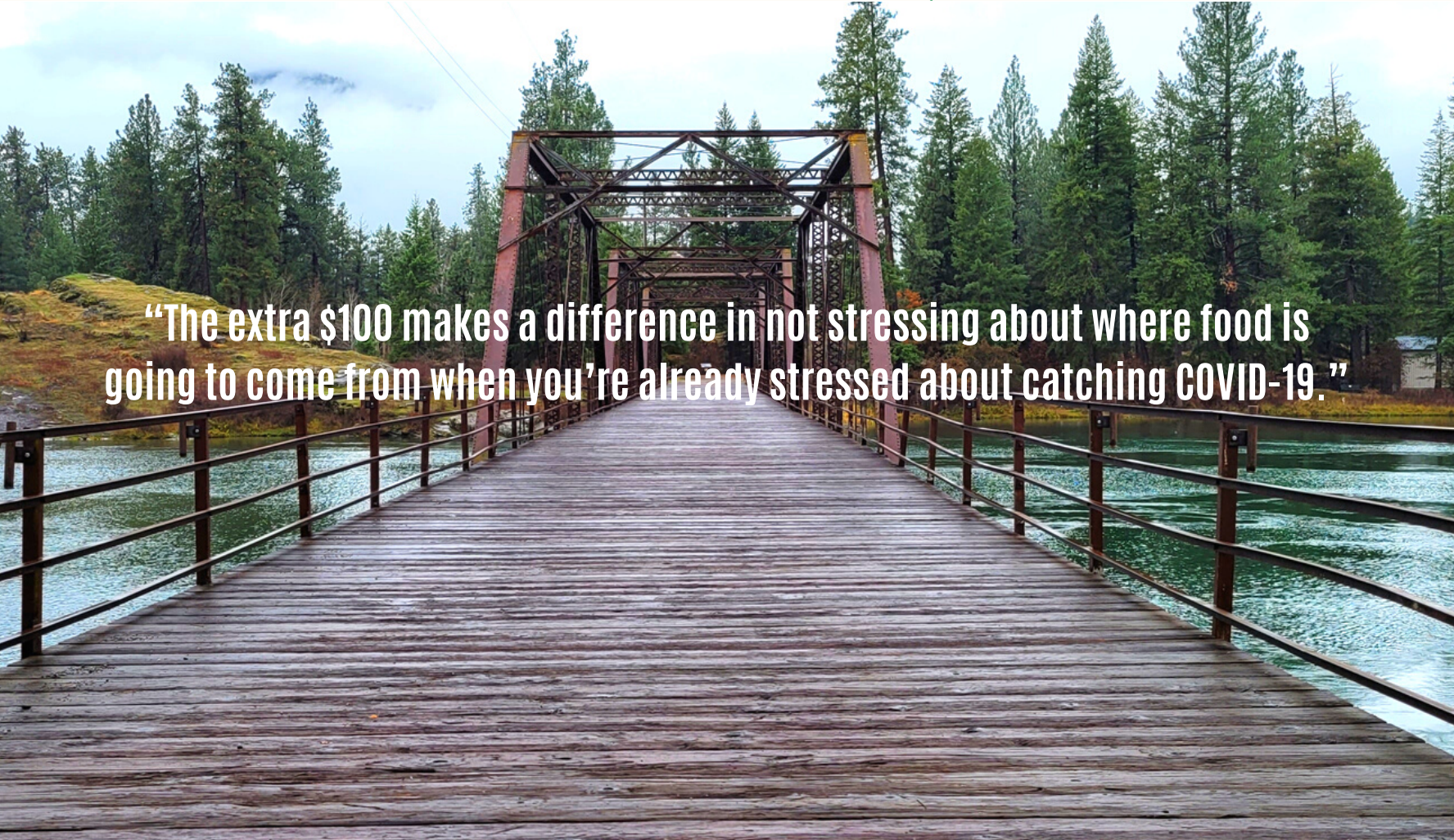
For this resident of Lake County, COVID's effects were felt early. In February, she learned that the farmer's market where her family sells food may not open for the summer, and from there, the effects continued. "We work with farmers and grow our own food, so we really felt everything early. My husband is a contractor and has lost three jobs. We also do a lot of babysitting now; my kids are essential workers and we have our grandkids throughout the week. COVID-19 has impacted us a lot and I'm at high risk, so we'll be impacted by this for a long time."

She explains that one of the largest obstacles of the pandemic has been adequate food access. "I have a restricted diet and limited choices in the grocery store, and early on it became a struggle to buy food. The food available for me in the store went from little to almost none. We doubled down on our farming, but it was a bad year for growing - it was hard to get produce to grow, and we couldn't buy the seeds we would usually get online, so food has been a real struggle for us." One thing that has helped her has been her household's access to SNAP. "We receive SNAP and it's a tremendous help. Without it I would starve because it can be difficult to find things that I can eat. Our SNAP goes to foods that I'm able to eat so I can get enough protein and be healthy."

Their community has been able to provide some relief as well. "Our community started a small food bank and I started volunteering for that and have picked up food there as well. The food boxes have been good, especially when we're able to get items like milk and cheese in addition to produce. That's the type of food we would like to have but with the food box, we didn't have to find the extra \$20 to purchase it, so it was such a boost. I'd love to see more milk - it would be so helpful when taking care of my grandkids." She has also tried to plan ahead, but it can be difficult. "Sometimes you get a lot of the same things, so I'm trying to figure out how to save some things for winter, or how to cook things we get that are new - I never want to waste anything."

Breanna & Melissa - Thompson Falls

“The extra \$100 makes a difference in not stressing about where food is going to come from when you’re already stressed about catching COVID-19.”



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. With her mother going through health issues, Breanna says that they have to be extra careful to avoid contracting COVID-19. "Everything has gotten a lot harder." When shutdowns began in March, she was unable to see family or friends in person, including her son, who is in foster care.

Breanna explains 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 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."

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 \$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 what would be needed to see her household through the pandemic, Breanna 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."

Grace - Thompson Falls



“I’ve always had a heart for people and making sure people get enough food.”

Grace describes herself as someone who has “a heart for people and making sure people get enough food.” Grace had always been comfortable enough to help others access food, working and volunteering at her local food bank when she was living in Oregon, and offering free dinners on Thanksgiving and Christmas at her multiple restaurants.

After experiencing a family tragedy and trying to help family members through addiction, Grace found herself having to rebuild her life when she moved back to Montana, “When I moved back to Montana I ended up with nothing. I always had a place to stay, but haven’t had my own place until I recently moved into subsidized housing,” she explains. During this time, she turned to her local food pantry for help.

“Before [COVID], I was at the point where I was rebuilding my life. I had gone through all of my savings helping my family.” Grace lives with her two dogs and receives SNAP benefits. She explains that “we just don’t always have enough money to eat. Once all of the bills are paid, you’re lucky if you have \$200 some months. I went down to \$21 in SNAP with my Social Security, I’m in subsidized housing, and every month I’m afraid that it might stop. It helps me to be able to feed myself and my dogs, it really helps.”

Grace often struggles to find foods that meet her allergy needs, leaving her unable to use many items that are available at her local food pantry. “I wish that good bread and produce were more available in small towns like they are in some bigger places, but I can’t make the longer trip very often.”

During this time, Grace has been able to lean on her housing community and has continued to help others. Recently, her food bank started receiving produce from a nearby farm, and Grace has been able to create a trusted friendship with the farm and bring fresh produce to her subsidized housing group to share with everyone who lives there. “We’ve been able to get boxes with fresh cabbage, carrots, zucchini, and so much more. It all gets put on the table in a main area, so everyone has access to it. It’s wonderful to help each other out – everyone takes what they need and always thinks of others.” Grace is excited about the partnership and the community that it creates. “I was able to talk to the delivery person and give them a list for a Thanksgiving meal for my housing community, and it was so special. Thinking about how different holidays will be this year, I’m thankful for the people who have the heart to make things like that possible.”

Lori - Libby



**“A box of produce might not seem like much to somebody else,
but to me, it really means a lot.”**

In the few months before COVID-19, Lori moved out of her house into an apartment, and had knee surgery. She says that she has been terrified of COVID since March. “Now it’s very difficult for me,” she explains. “When I had my house, I could open up the door and walk to my vehicle and go pick up my prescriptions or go to the food pantry, and now...I’m finding myself very isolated, even though my daughter helps me sometimes.” Her daughter has been able to pick up groceries for her, but Lori understands that her daughter has her own life and says that it’s difficult to depend on others for everything. “I know I need to be seen by the doctor, but I don’t want to go anywhere. That has nothing to do with food, but you know, it’s all interconnected even when it doesn’t seem like it.”

Lori has depended on the food bank off and on, but now more than ever, SNAP and the food bank are important in her life. Moving to an apartment has saved Lori a bit of money, but with a fixed income, SNAP remains crucial for her. “SNAP is everything to me...if it wasn’t for SNAP, I’d be in a lot of trouble,” Lori says. With SNAP, she is able to stock up when certain things are less expensive or on sale. The produce boxes from her food bank have also been helpful, providing fresh foods that she is grateful to have access to. “[During COVID] there have been boxes of produce, which is great. It’s all good, nutritious stuff. A box of produce might not seem like much to somebody else, but to me, it really means a lot.”

She also realizes the stigma that can accompany programs like SNAP. “When you don’t live like I live, it can be hard to understand. I’ll say ‘I really need a trip to the store’, and sometimes people don’t realize that when you need to make that trip it’s because you really need to. You don’t like asking other people.” She notes that “when people do get SNAP, it’s not that they necessarily want to. I’ll go stock up on food and spend my SNAP that I’ve saved for months, which is why I am able to come in and do this, but someone might think ‘well, how did she get \$300 in food stamps?’. There are things like that that other people don’t think about, but it’s kind of what you have to do.”

MFBN Response: Food Distribution

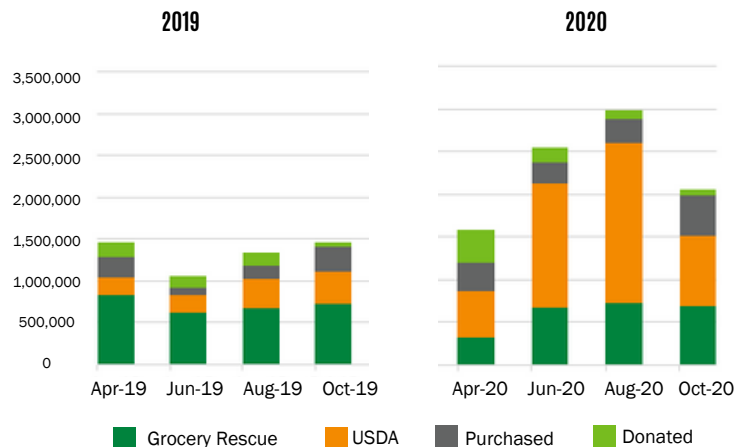
COVID-19 brought unprecedented challenges to people across our state, impacting those who were already struggling or living paycheck to paycheck most severely.

MFBN moved quickly to respond to COVID, anticipating the growing need and challenges ahead. As the only statewide food bank, MFBN helps ensure that local food pantries and programs have enough food to meet the needs of their communities. Sourcing and distributing additional food to our network became our immediate priority.

The food available through Grocery Rescue experienced a drastic decline following the rush of people stocking up for stay-at-home orders. To help offset this decline we purchased additional food wherever possible, but faced new challenges with delays in orders and increasing prices.

USDA foods have been particularly crucial, including The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) and two temporary programs - trade mitigation food purchases and the Farmers to Families food box program.

Pounds of Food Distributed by MFBN





The number of individuals served by MFBN's partner network surged in March and April, as households experienced the brunt of the economic crisis. Many of Montana's larger cities saw an increase in households needing food assistance of more than 200% during these months.

Following this initial spike, the levels of need at Montana's food pantries varied drastically between communities. Those heavily reliant on tourism and the service industry continue to experience greater demand, while others saw the need decline to pre-pandemic levels.

Significantly, many households were able to receive federal relief through expanded Unemployment Insurance, emergency SNAP allotments, emergency housing assistance, and other federal programs intended to reduce hardship for families and bolster local economies. As these federal benefits became available, the need declined at many food pantries significantly. However, these programs are temporary and most will end by December 2020 without action by Congress.

Farmers to Families



As traditional sources of food became less accessible due to high demand and limitations of the supply chain, the USDA Farmers to Families food box program provided an important source of fresh, healthy foods to Montana households, while supporting our nation's farmers.

5 million pounds
of food distributed through MFBN partners in
15 counties
May 1 - Nov 30, 2020

Partnered with 5 vendors
Bringing fresh produce, dairy, and meats to Montana households

Farmers to Families helped facilitate new collaborations among local organizations, and successfully provided food in many of Montana's outlying communities through creative distribution solutions.



MFBN Response: Advocacy

Addressing hunger in Montana requires a strong response from state and federal policymakers, particularly during a crisis such as COVID. The food bank system cannot meet the need for food assistance alone, nor is it intended to.

MFBN is working closely with Montana's Congressional delegation and state leaders to advocate for comprehensive COVID relief throughout our current health crisis and the longer term economic recovery. MFBN urged support for the passage and implementation of important anti-hunger policies included in the Families First Coronavirus Response Act and the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act. These federal relief packages included essential support for struggling families including:

- Key waivers and flexibility for federal nutrition programs:
 - SNAP participants received emergency allotments, boosting everyone to the maximum benefit for their household size (However, the lowest-income SNAP participants - approximately 40% of all participants - already receive the maximum allotment and therefore did not receive additional assistance)
 - Policies to streamline the SNAP application process, reducing administrative barriers
 - Waivers to allow schools and community partners to provide free meals to all students year-round
 - Waivers to allow families to access WIC without the usual in-person requirements
- Additional funds for TEFAP commodities to help food banks meet the increased demand for food assistance

- New programs to respond to the unique challenges of the pandemic:
 - Pandemic-EBT (P-EBT), which provides food benefits to families losing access to free and reduced price school meals due to school closures or remote learning models
 - Farmers to Families food box program
- Policies to address root causes of hunger including housing support, enhanced and extended Unemployment Insurance benefits, support to businesses to reduce layoffs, and paid-leave for workers impacted by the pandemic

Unfortunately, many of these programs and policies end in December 2020, despite surging numbers of COVID cases and continued economic uncertainty. Montana Food Bank Network continues to advocate for another much-needed round of comprehensive federal support that includes strengthening SNAP benefits for all SNAP households for the duration of the economic downturn.

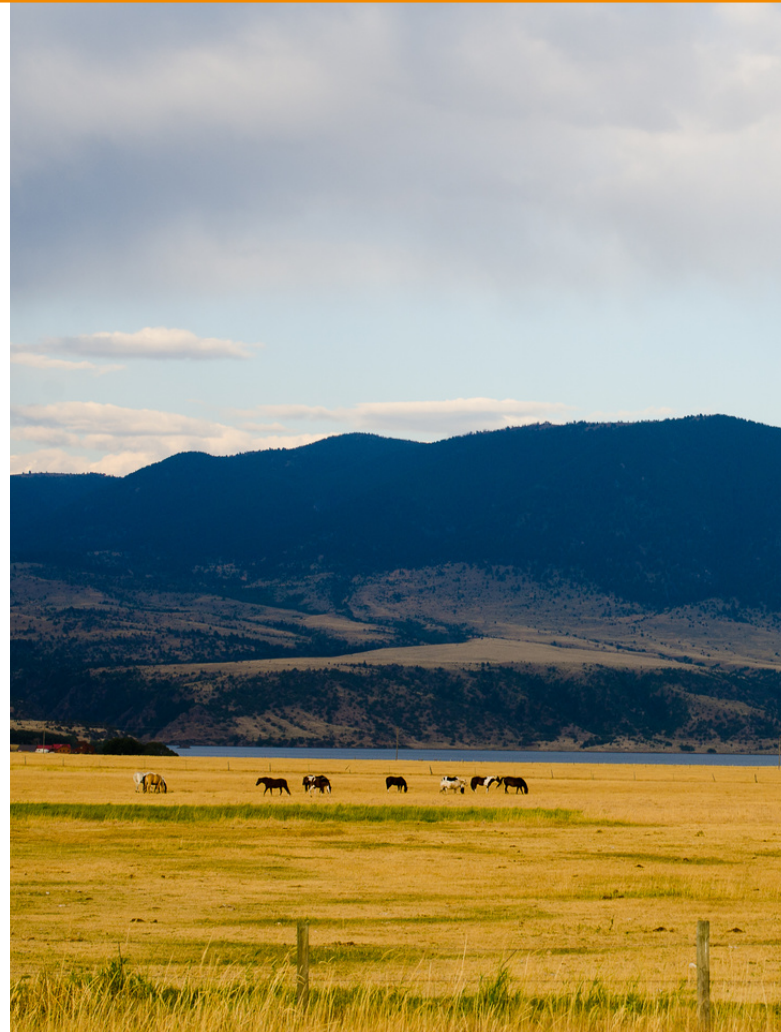


Community Response

During the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, food pantries and other food programs across Montana moved swiftly to respond to the needs of their communities. Nearly every partner agency in MFBN's network was able to continue operating, even during initial shutdown orders, given their essential role to communities.

In a matter of days and weeks, community food providers developed new systems for distributing food to minimize contact and prioritize safety. Food pantries and programs also had to adjust to changes in volunteer capacity, as many rely heavily on the great work of senior volunteers, a more vulnerable demographic.

Montana's food pantries and other community food providers adapted and responded, serving on the front lines of the COVID crisis. Thanks to their incredible response, tens of thousands of Montana households are able to meet their most basic need - food - during the height of the pandemic and through the long recovery ahead of us.



Browning Backpack Program

"COVID-19 is literally affecting every aspect of life on the Blackfeet Nation. One of the most significant ripple effects of the pandemic has been an increase in food insecurity. The Blackfeet Nation is located in a very rural and isolated area in Northwest Montana. For perspective, we are two hours in any direction from the nearest Walmart. We have been declared a food desert, and in combination with our high unemployment rate, we suffer from extreme food insecurity. The pandemic has brought more families to the reservation due to safety concerns, unemployment and housing loss. This results in multiple families living together in one home which further strains the already suffering family food budget.

"In response to this increased need, Browning Public Schools continues to offer breakfast, lunch and supper to all students through the Child Nutrition programs. It also currently offers curbside delivery of the MFBN weekend Backpack meals each Friday. There is a significant increase in the demand for these weekend Backpacks, which reflects the ongoing food insecurity created by the pandemic. We do not have the inventory to provide these weekend Backpack meals to every PreK-6 student, so the deliveries have been prioritized to our low-income neighborhoods.

"Our district also offers several school-based food pantries which have had to adapt their service model due to the pandemic. Rather than allowing students to access the pantry and self-select foods as was previous practice, emergency food boxes are now distributed via curbside pickup or delivery, following all safety precautions. In the future, we hope to have the capacity to allow students to call or email their "order" in for curbside pickup/delivery to re-create their sense of independence in being able to self-select their food boxes."

Central Montana Community Cupboard



"Before March 2020, the Central Montana Community Cupboard in Lewistown operated much like a typical food pantry. We had shopping lists based on household size and our clients would come in, complete the required paperwork, and choose the food items they would like from each category on the shopping list, as well as some extra items available that day. Since COVID-19 began, the biggest challenge that we've faced is the new food distribution model. When we give out pre-made boxes of food instead of allowing clients to choose everything themselves, it's more difficult to meet individual needs and give clients things that they like or know that they are able to use.

"Even though cases were slow in Fergus county early on, we chose to start serving people outside for the safety of our volunteers and clients. Now, our clients come to the door and let our volunteers know what meat and bakery items they prefer, and a masked and gloved volunteer boxes up the meat, bakery items, and any extra things such as dairy products, fresh vegetables, or toilet paper that the client might need. In order to streamline distributions, we have pre-made boxes ready, according to family size. Our community has been very kind by giving donations of grocery items and financial support. We have also seen an increase in clients from surrounding counties of Wheatland, Petroleum, and Judith Basin in the recent months.

"Lewistown residents have seen shifts in their ways of life as a result of COVID. People are wearing their masks and "making do", but it is evident that businesses are hurting with residents being cautious of their outings and businesses being cautious for the safety of the community."

North Valley Food Bank



"North Valley Food Bank was already in expansion mode when our communities started to experience the economic effects of COVID.

"As a tourist town, Whitefish and the surrounding communities are home to a high proportion of hourly workers. Before October of 2019, North Valley Food Bank in Whitefish distributed food only two hours a week at its facility, and delivered rescue food every other Friday to FAST Blackfeet (the Food Access and Sustainability Team commodities program).

"However, the team at North Valley Food Bank could tell even back then that the need for food in the community and outlying areas was greater than the 120 families a week they were serving. They identified access as the key impediment to meeting this demand. So, North Valley added an additional distribution day at the food bank and increased hours from two hours a week to six hours a week. It was a smart move: the number of customers using the food bank steadily climbed and fortunately, so did the rescue food donations.

"When jobs were lost and food insecurity was amplified in April of this year, North Valley Food Bank was ready to increase their hours even further into the evening times, in addition to adopting a drive-through model. The North Valley drive-through is open 14 hours per week, serving an average of 225 families each week. Two hours have been reserved for elderly and immunocompromised customers only. Additionally, North Valley Food Bank volunteers telephoned all potentially vulnerable customers and offered a home delivery service. As many as 75 households per week have been receiving home deliveries.

"A survey of North Valley's customers led to deeper partnerships with the Flathead Food Bank and the Tobacco Valley Food Bank, resulting in mobile food pantry routes for North Valley Food Bank to Essex, Evergreen, Olney, and Trego, all of which are located in food deserts. The new food pantry routes and the increased number of local customers required North Valley Food Bank to further increase its logistics capacity. Through the help of a generous donor, a refrigerated "box truck" was purchased in late April to meet these needs. According to Lauren Jarrold, the North Valley Food Bank's Director of Operations, "The box truck was a game changer!" In addition to picking up significantly greater amounts of rescue food and delivering weekly food boxes, the truck delivers to Farm Hands, whose loading area is too small to off-load the Montana Food Bank Network's semi-truck. The truck also regularly delivers federally-funded food boxes to the FAST Blackfeet program, which has limited storage space for larger deliveries."

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of our grocery store workers, gas station cashiers, childcare providers, and other jobs deemed 'essential' yet often undervalued in our society, as many of these workers struggle just to make ends meet. It has brought to light the disparities in health and economic outcomes by race and ethnicity, and demonstrated the deep inadequacies of our food system. It is up to all of us to learn from this crisis, hold our policymakers accountable, and work to build stronger systems going forward.

Through the Families First Act and other COVID-response policies, Congress demonstrated how quickly we can strengthen our social safety net, helping vital programs work even better. While these policy changes have been particularly crucial during the COVID crisis, thousands of Montanans are facing their own crises every day. Every day in Montana we have people facing health emergencies and navigating unexpected job losses. Every day, we have low-wage workers serving our communities but unable to afford housing, parents skipping meals so their children can eat, and seniors choosing between food and medication.

COVID has been an opportunity to see firsthand the ways that straightforward policy changes can improve access and streamline program efficiencies. Policy changes for SNAP, School Meals, Summer Food, WIC, commodity foods, and other public nutrition programs have made them more accessible to families and reduced administrative burden for caseworkers. Join us in urging Congress to implement these policies and others on a permanent basis through upcoming Farm Bill and Child Nutrition Reauthorization negotiations.

We hope that the data and stories in this report illustrate the impacts of COVID-19 to food insecurity in Montana, as well as the critical role of both policymakers and communities in addressing the need for food.

Montana's food pantries and other emergency food providers have been an inspiration throughout this crisis, continually responding to challenges and adapting services to ensure they are able to serve their communities. But a lot of work remains to be done - our nation, state, and communities must make ending hunger a priority.

Talk to your policymakers, business leaders, and community partners about the issue of hunger, its root causes, and widespread consequences on health, education, and economic productivity. Together, we can better address the current needs of families and individuals in our state, and ensure that Montana comes out of this crisis stronger and healthier than before.



Get Involved

To join the Montana Food Bank Network in anti-hunger advocacy, text **MFBN** to **52886**

Advocate

Your voice is powerful and when combined with other Montanans, it can make a huge difference. Urge our state and federal policymakers to invest in and strengthen federal nutrition programs, while supporting access to affordable education, childcare, healthcare, and housing.

Educate

Talk to policymakers and community members about hunger. Address myths and misconceptions, and educate them on the needs and challenges facing Montana families. Increased awareness and understanding is the first step towards action.

Donate

Your support is critical to the work of Montana Food Bank Network and other organizations fighting hunger across the state. Whether you 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, visit **mfbn.org**.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to all the individuals featured in this report for sharing their experiences and investing time in this project. Their generosity made this project possible.

Thank you to our partner agencies and programs who shared stories on their COVID responses and challenges: Browning Backpack Program, Central Montana Community Cupboard, and North Valley Food Bank

A special thanks to our partner agencies who distributed COVID Impact surveys during a time of increased need and multiple obstacles. The 917 responses MFBN received to the survey is a testament to your dedication and commitment to better understanding and fighting hunger in Montana. Your hard work and compassion makes a tremendous impact on your communities.

REPORT AUTHOR: Lorianne Burhop

PROJECT COORDINATOR: Elisha Buchholz

STORY COLLECTION: Meredith Dahlk

For more information, please contact Elisha Buchholz, Public Policy Coordinator at the Montana Food Bank Network, 406-215-1771, ebuchholz@mfbn.org.



Voices of Montana

Stories of Hunger & Hope

2020 COVID-19 Edition



Montana Food Bank Network 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 make a donation visit, www.mfbn.org.

MONTANA FOOD BANK NETWORK

5625 Expressway, Missoula, MT 59808
Phone: (406) 721-3825 Fax: (406) 542-3770
Email: info@mfbn.org