

## Purpose

Montana Food Bank Network (MFBN) is conducting a series of listening sessions with individuals who have lived expertise of food insecurity and with navigating public food programs. These Lived Expert Listening Sessions allow MFBN to better understand the realities of food insecurity in Montana, which informs and strengthens our work. Information and ideas from these sessions will allow MFBN to better educate the public and our lawmakers on the experience of food insecurity, root causes that contribute to and perpetuate food insecurity in our state, and policy and programmatic solutions.

## Session Details

**Date:** September 22, 2021

**Location:** Family Service, Billings

**Topics:** School Meals, Summer Food Service Program, WIC    **Participants:** 6

## Key Takeaways

- Participants considered themselves caretakers and advocates, and all were parents and/or caring for their grandchildren or nieces and nephews.

### School Meal Programs

- Quality and quantity of food is lacking within one of the local school districts. Satisfaction with school meals varied significantly between communities.
- School meals often are not enough food for the whole day. Many participants sent extra food to school with the children to supplement school meals.
- Amount of time allotted for students to eat is not enough, particularly for breakfast, depending on the child's bus schedule.

*"Nutrition is always telling you, 'Slow down, take your time, eat, your body will digest it better,' but the schools are teaching these kids to hurry up, hurry up, hurry up."*

- Reports of issues with lunch debt shaming, including denying lunch to one student and reminding students of unpaid balances in front of other kids.

*"I was behind [on payments] and the [staff] reminded my son. They shouldn't do that to him. They should just call me."*

- Participants appreciated free meals for all kids during the pandemic, reducing stigma and concerns over submitting a meal application, and unpaid lunch debt.

*"COVID has made it easier...everybody's school lunch is free no matter if they're on free and reduced meals or not. That part made it super simple...I know sometimes it can be a stigma too and I think that's a lot easier now."*

- At least one district made school meals available through delivery, allowing families to receive a box of food that could last two weeks.

## WIC

- Negative experiences with the program years ago continues to impact feelings on WIC, including recollections of judgmental and unfriendly staff.
- Marking off of the UPC code on formula at the store feels judgmental for participants.
- Accessing benefits through the EBT card is easier and reduces stigmatization, compared to paper vouchers.

*"I love the card...going from the checks to the card was such a relief...It's so much better. As hard as it is, it's so much better."*

- The pandemic-related boost helped participants include more produce in their daily diets.  
*"It's really great because my kids love fresh fruit. We really eat a lot of fresh fruit and veggies - broccoli, root vegetables, and peppers, the little bell peppers."*

## Summer Food Service Program

- Throughout COVID, parents appreciated the convenience of grab and go meals but children missed the ability to congregate at parks during free summer meals.
- Grab and go meals would be more convenient if hours were extended before or after normal work hours. There is also a need for meal deliveries for families that cannot get to a site.

*"For stay-at-home moms, it's a lot easier. If I was working, how would I...You know? Because they always just had [meal pickups] during lunch time...Even if you had it in the morning, the parent could pick it up, and drop it off [at home]."*

- Participants found home delivered food to be very helpful. At least two area districts (Laurel and Lockwood) delivered food to homes.

*"It was really easy...The kids weren't involved at all so that made it really nice. There was no judgement with the kids or anything. Food would show up at your door."*

- Neighborhoods that are considered high-income but have low-income housing do not have meal sites, making access difficult.

## Next Steps

Participants are willing to continue advocating through meetings with lawmakers and sharing their stories and perspectives, but would need resources like child care and advocacy training to fully participate.

MFBN will:

- Engage listening session participants as advocates by facilitating meetings with lawmakers, providing avenues to share their stories, and informing them of policy updates and advocacy opportunities.
- Integrate key takeaways from the listening session into child nutrition advocacy work.
- Share key takeaways with state program administrators, policymakers, and other community partners.
- Continue to host listening sessions with Lived Experts in additional communities across the state to reach different demographics and better understand the unique challenges of each community.
- Continue to learn from and foster relationships with individuals with lived expertise of food insecurity to better ensure that those voices and perspectives are guiding the work of MFBN.