

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: November 19, 2021

Location: Project Care, Anaconda

Topics: WIC & Pandemic EBT

Participants: 3

Key Takeaways

- Participants came from dual-parent and single-parent households with children ranging in age from two to over 18.

WIC

- Waivers put in place during the pandemic allowing participants to complete appointments virtually were appreciated because it made it easier to attend, especially for large families
- However, participants also missed the in-person appointments because they appreciated the health checks and connections with staff
- Participants reported experiencing stigma when using WIC benefits at the store, however this situation has improved with the implementation of electronic benefit cards

"There definitely is a stigma around using public programs. It would take the cashier a very long time. They'd have to sit there and look at the check. They'd have to call the manager over, see if you were approved... The line would start to back up and I would get looks from some of the other store customers. Now you can just swipe a card that looks just like other people's debit or credit cards so someone like a bystander doesn't really know the difference."

- Participants reported that fruit and vegetable purchases tend to be more expensive than other food and the current boost in WIC benefits helped participants increase their household's fruit and vegetable intake

"Fruits and vegetables, especially fresh, are so expensive, especially lately, and the cost keeps going up and up."

- The availability of WIC products at the store can be challenging, particularly in rural areas

"I'll look at the (app and), it tells you what you can and can't buy, and it'll have all these different brands like the yogurt for example. All different flavors and brands of yogurt. And then you go into the store and there's like two you can buy out of the whole selection. That's just frustrating."

- Participants noted that WIC helped connect them to other resources and services, such as a lactation consultant and the Parents as Teachers home visiting program
- Participants reported a positive, supportive environment at their local WIC clinic

"They comment on how (the kids) are growing and there's a smile for them. You know, it's really cool that they're personable like that."

- When asked what participants would change about the WIC program, ideas included:
 - additional milk benefits, or the ability to utilize unused benefits for what the household needs at that time (for example: instead of buying juice, they could buy milk)
 - increasing the availability of WIC approved foods at grocery stores
- Participants who have used the program for a number of years have seen an improvement in the variety of food options available through WIC

"Some of the products of changed, for cheese they now have string cheese, you want your kids to snack healthy."

Pandemic EBT (P-EBT)

- Receiving P-EBT benefits helped participants make ends meet when children were home from school
- P-EBT benefits allowed households the autonomy to make food choices that best fit their dietary needs
- There was confusion on which benefits were P-EBT, SNAP emergency allotments or boosted SNAP benefits

"...during home schooling, [the kids] were eating everything in the house...having that extra from the pandemic benefits was awesome."

"It helped a lot because prices have been slowly going up."

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.