



in partnership with

## Butte Emergency Food Bank

# LIVED EXPERT LISTENING SESSION

## 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:** Butte Emergency Food Bank, Butte

**Topics:** School Meals, Summer Food Service Program & Pandemic EBT **Participants:** 3

## Key Takeaways

- Group participants included mothers and aunts caring for their own children and/or their nieces and nephews.

### School Meal Programs

- Concern over the quality of food with participants noting that the children have described the meals as soggy and often cold; one participant suggested that COVID protocols have made it harder for the school to keep the lunches hot, as they are currently being served in the classroom
- Adequate time to eat breakfast was a concern, with participants reporting that busses often arrive too late to allow time for breakfast and children instead receive a granola bar
- Participants reported that children experience stigma from peers and school staff when participating in the Free and Reduced-Price School Meal program

*"(My daughter) wants money to get (ala carte items). I told her, we're on disability. I can't afford to give you money. And her friends always have money. She gets embarrassed about the free lunch. So, sometimes she won't even go."*

- One participant reported that her nephew was denied food due to an outstanding meal balance

*"He didn't tell me anything about (it) until I got a letter in the mail stating that I owe the school like \$100-something dollars. And then he finally came out with it, 'They don't let me eat because I owe this'. They will not let them eat in that school if they do not have that bill paid."*

- Participants agreed that serving sizes are insufficient for many students, potentially due to nutrition standards
- When asked what changes they would like to see made to the school lunch program, all participants indicated increased portions would be the most needed

*"...the biggest thing is the portions, because they are trying to be so health conscious about it...Well, you got to feed these kids in order for them to still be awake and able to focus."*

## Pandemic EBT (P-EBT)

- P-EBT helped participants provide food for their households, freeing up funds to pay rent and other bills

*"I filled my freezer, it was awesome. It helped immensely. It was a lifesaver, to tell you the truth."*

*"I was just scared I wouldn't be able to feed my family...(Because of P-EBT), I was able to pay my bills, get caught up on the power bill, get caught up on rent, because it fed us."*

- Participants encouraged Congress to consider the continued importance of P-EBT, given rising food costs and the challenges of losing access to school meals during the summer months

*"It would just be nice for those of us who are struggling and trying to get on our feet. To have a little extra so that we can afford to feed our kids. That's all we want, we just want our kids to be happy and healthy."*

## Summer Food Service Program

- Participants felt there were plenty of meal site locations throughout the community

*"It was nice during the summer because if we were at the park we'd find one of them."*

- There was a consensus among participants that meals provided through the Summer Food Service Program were better than meals served at school

*"Those sack lunches, there's so much in there. It lasts him almost all day because he gets the breakfast and the lunch, and those sacks are filled to the brim."*

- COVID waivers added important flexibility to the program, including the option to 'grab and go' meals (rather than eat on site), and the ability to pick up multiple meals at one time

*"She gets embarrassed eating in front of people. So, it's better for her to be able to just sit at home, relax and eat."*

## 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.