



"We always manage but SNAP truly only lasts about 2 weeks of the month."

Survey Respondent, Great Falls

Amanda - Billings



"Our budget is stretched to the breaking point and things seem to get more desperate each month."

My name is Amanda, and I live in Billings with my spouse and our 10-year-old son. Even though my spouse and I both work hard and make decent salaries as Registered Nurses, our budget is tight because of the high cost of living. I know that if we're struggling to feed our family it must be unimaginably harder for others. As a nurse, I have seen issues of food insecurity affecting my patients. I have also volunteered at a local elementary school and with homeless teens in my community. It is heartbreaking to be involved in trying to meet the basic needs of children who should just be allowed to be kids without worrying about if they have food to eat.

During the past two school years, free school meals [available through waivers during the pandemic] were helpful for my family and others. The waivers allowed all children to receive free school meals, reducing monthly food expenses. When those waivers ended, we lost that safety net. Our budget is stretched to the breaking point and things seem to get more desperate each month. I cried in September when I had to start paying for school lunch again because there wasn't anything left to cut to make our income stretch to all the necessities. I now am selling my plasma

to try and bridge the gaps but we are still struggling. One challenge for my family is that my son has dyslexia, and his school doesn't provide any support services for him. In the hopes of providing him with tools he needs to be successful, we pay for tutoring twice a week. Our family has had to have tough conversations about the fact that, if money gets any tighter, he may have to stop going. It feels terrible to know your son needs support, but the cost may mean he doesn't get it.

This year, the cost of our weekly groceries has gone up significantly, as has the cost of gas. Higher prices are impacting what we buy at the grocery store. We lean more heavily on cheap foods like bulk packages of ramen noodles and mac and cheese, even though we know they don't have good nutritional value. I am pre-diabetic and my spouse is diabetic. We know what we should eat to fuel our bodies but we can't afford healthy food and it's scary to think the damage it is doing to our bodies. I also shop at the discount grocer in town and buy expired food to keep us afloat.

I know if things are this tough for my family, the challenges are much greater for families with fewer resources. So many parents are facing impossible decisions right now between basics like food, housing, and health care. Please do what you can to help people across our state and our nation who are struggling with food insecurity!

Toni - Helena

My name is Toni and I live in Helena. I am a single lady in my 80s who recently moved into a senior complex for a safer unit and no steps. With my ongoing medical bills, it's been a struggle to make ends meet without the help of Helena Food Share's grocery assistance for the past several years. Now I'm dealing with extensive dental issues with very little dental insurance.

Nearly 30 years ago, I divorced and returned to my home state of Montana. My expectation was that the divorce funds would be ample income until I secured work. However, I had not realized that in 1993 the average office job in Montana had a very poor wage. Even though I was well-qualified for office work, temporary employment was all I could get for nearly a year, thus my bank account dwindled considerably.

Eventually, I secured full-time employment transcribing for a psychiatrist. After leaving the job after nearly 5 years, my wage was just \$7.95 per hour. I moved to a higher wage employment and was able to pay expenses until having bilateral knee replacement at age 62. Insurance paid for most of the \$80,000 surgery but 20% was left to me to pay, adding a big amount to my debt.

I applied for Social Security since the surgery required considerable rehabilitation after the hospital stay. My Social Security benefits were minimal

"Even though I was well-qualified for office work, temporary employment was all I could get for nearly a year..."

so I turned to Helena Food Share and was grateful for the help. They provide a wide variety of nourishing staples.

A second marriage gave me confidence that life was improving. However, within three years my husband died of cancer, again shortening my income. Moving again with no income, I rented a duplex unit in an older house. I applied for Helena Housing and after a number of months was accepted. Throughout this time, I supplemented my groceries with Helena Food Share, a truly blessed program. The staff are professional, courteous, and exceptionally helpful.

During my kaleidoscope life with constant change, I was introduced to the gambling machines of Montana. For nearly two years I hit many jackpots, using the funds to pay rent, power, and car payments. I struggle with a gambling addiction as a result.

Finally, I again secured work through a senior employment program, working at Helena Job Service for two years until age 75. While working at Job Service, plus Social Security, my income was okay but steady, though my supervisor wanted me to apply for SNAP. My benefit amount was \$10. During the pandemic, my SNAP became \$220 per month [with SNAP Emergency Allotments]. A terrific help. Currently, I receive \$23 per month, for which I am grateful as it buys milk, eggs, bread, and cereal.

Helena Housing, Helena Food Share, and other programs such as SNAP and LIEAP (Low Income Energy Assistance Program) are amazing programs to lend a hand for those of us whose life experiences and circumstances have caused our income to decrease. It surprises me as to how expensive things like prescriptions and personal items can be. Helena Food Share and SNAP create a security that gives one a sense of relief - and for that I am most grateful.

Sarah - Helena

My name is Sarah, I live in Helena, and I'm a single mother of an 8-year-old boy. The past year has been full of change and adjustment for me and my son. At the beginning of the year, I was able to rejoin the workforce, something I had been working very hard to do. I started feeling like I was getting my life back and that I was finally going to bring my son and myself out of poverty. Then, about a month after I started my new job, I received very unexpected news. My landlord served me with a notice to vacate - not because of any violations or complaints, but simply because the owner wanted to make changes. Suddenly I found myself packing all of mine and my son's belongings into boxes and into storage. We were only able to live in that apartment for a year.

The challenges that come with being homeless are far-reaching. I consider myself lucky to have family in town that my son and I were able to stay with. Many of those experiencing homelessness don't have anywhere to go. So I kept my head up no matter how hard it was.

One of the most difficult experiences for me was when I found myself packing up that apartment, avoiding the kitchen. Because I had just worked so hard and budgeted so tightly, I had built up staple items for our household. Stores of flour, sugar, oats, canned foods, meats, and dairy. I was able to have full cupboards and refrigerator to feed myself and my son, and I was so proud of what I had accomplished. I had to pack up the kitchen and though I had family to stay with, it didn't come without challenges. There was only so much cupboard space for everyone to keep their food. So as I looked at my hard-earned and well-stocked kitchen, I had to box up 75% or more of it to give away. I simply had

"All I've ever
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nowhere I could put it. The open cereal boxes, the open stores of flour and oats... none of those things could be donated. As someone who loathes to throw away good food, I was able to find family and friends that would take it so it wouldn't go to waste.

The rising cost of living in my community has increased at alarming rates, especially the cost of housing and food. But I always look toward the future with hope. I strive to be a better person today than I was yesterday. Sometimes the reality of how hard it is just to make it through the day can be rough. I have a lot of supportive people in my life that have helped me keep my head up so I can be that ray of hope for my son to see, so he doesn't have to have worry at such a young age.

I want people to understand that in poverty, challenges go hand in hand. Where there's housing instability, there is also hunger. Where there is hunger, there are also health issues. It's an ever-revolving door of trying to balance and stabilize one problem, just to have something else start to topple over. I had finally found work and thought I would be able to provide stability for my son. Instead, with the sudden loss of our home, I found our family foundation more unstable than it had been in a long time.

Many people don't realize that a lot of people face poverty in silence. It's the silent struggle of a single parent not feeling like they have any other choice. Sacrificing one thing after another so that their children don't go without. Sacrificing more and more to fill the ever-widening gap.

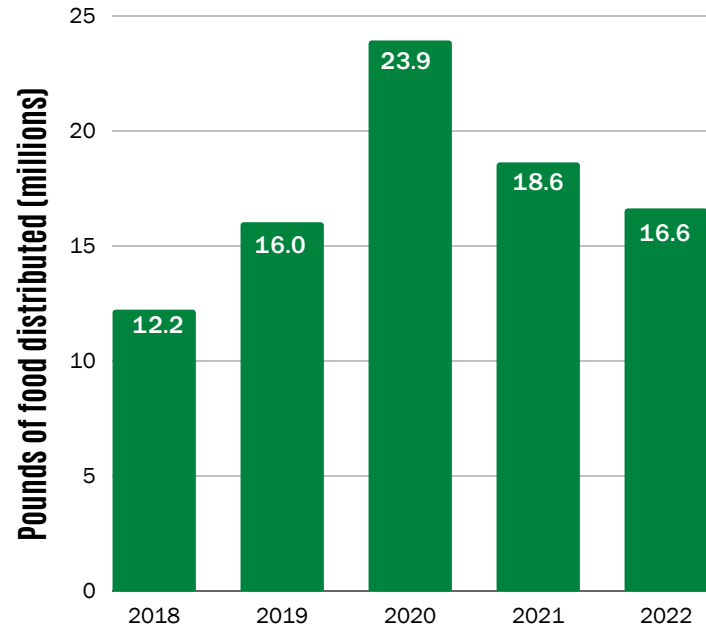
All I've ever wanted for my family is stability - a solid foundation, balance, understanding, and options. There are many assistance programs out there, but it's disheartening when it's still not enough to survive. Often, what we need is still out of reach. Food is essential to life. It shouldn't be such a hard climb to just survive.

MFBN Food Distribution

In 2022, MFBN distributed over 16 million pounds of food, approximately two million fewer pounds compared to 2021. However, this decrease in pounds distributed by MFBN does not reflect a decline in need at the local level. Member agencies of MFBN served an average of 38,600 households each month in 2022 compared to 34,500 households per month in 2021.

The decrease in pounds is largely due to the reduction in USDA foods that were available in 2021 compared to 2022. Additionally, we saw a significant reduction in food available through the Retail Food Rescue Program as stores experienced higher demand, resulting in fewer donations to food banks.

Pounds of Food Distributed by MFBN





Serving Neighbors

MFBN works with food pantries, meal programs, and other community partners across the state to meet the need for food assistance.

In 2022, local food pantries and meal programs experienced more than 460,000 total visits from Montana households, a greater number than 2020 during the height of the pandemic.

Household Visits to MFBN Member Agencies

	2019	2020	2021	2022
Total Household Visits	456,351	459,407	414,301	463,716
Average Households per Month	38,029	38,284	34,501	38,643



"It is so hard out here for us, and we all need help."

Survey Respondent, Kalispell

Custer County Food Bank



My name is Stephanie Kuchynka and I am the Executive Director of the Custer County Food Bank in Miles City. Miles City, with a population of 8,500, is in southeast Montana and a very rural area. The main service area of our food bank is Custer County, but we are open to clients from all over the state. We serve several families from surrounding small communities that do not have local food pantries.

We currently have approximately 375 families on our client list. Each month we distribute 300 monthly food baskets to food-insecure households. The monthly food baskets include consistent staples of ground beef, chicken, other animal protein when available, cereal, soup, canned fruits, canned vegetables, peanut butter, tuna, pasta, milk, and eggs. The basket quantities vary based on the size of family.

The Custer County Food Bank participates in retail food rescue with our local grocery stores. Monday through Friday, we pick up donated post-sale dated food items from Walmart, Albertsons, and Reynolds. Our volunteer staff sorts and stocks our shopping area with these items. Our clients are allowed to shop this rotating stock of donated goods once per week. Many clients comment that this extra shopping opportunity helps get them through the month.



During the initial outbreak of the COVID pandemic, our food bank saw a decline in active clients. This decline was due to several factors, including increased SNAP benefits, stimulus payments, and a fear of leaving their homes to run errands. Since the end of the boosted SNAP benefits and stimulus payments, we have seen a massive increase in active food bank clients. Inflation has been the main driver for so many of the clients I have visited with. People who are working and were making ends meet can no longer keep up with the skyrocketing costs of food and fuel. We are now serving 100 more families each month than we were 18 months ago.

The Custer County Food Bank is more important than ever for so many of our struggling neighbors. Miles City is such a generous community when it comes to supporting our own, but we are facing shortages. Up until six months ago, we were able to provide each household with a dozen eggs that were donated through our Grocery Rescue Program. Now we are having to buy all the eggs we distribute. Due to the rising cost of eggs, we reduced our distribution to just a half dozen for each household. This has been tough for our clients and I'm constantly having to gently explain why the change has been made. The combination of a much higher client load and supply chain issues, I am regularly dealing with shortages of peanut butter, cereal, milk, and ground beef. To combat this supply break down, I have ramped up food drive events, fundraising efforts, and increased our social media presence to draw attention to the incredible need we face.

In spite of our increased efforts and our community's incredible generosity, as the director of the Custer County Food Bank, I am always looking ahead. Making sure our pantry is stocked with grocery staples is a regular concern of mine. I'm so grateful for the food we collect, but always fearful that the next month won't be as successful. Ensuring that consistent access to quality sustenance is available to our ever-expanding client base is my biggest concern. Thank you for taking time to read about the Custer County Food Bank and our concerns. We are thankful for any additional assistance that can be provided.

FAST Blackfeet Ō'yō'·p' Pantry



FAST Blackfeet is a nonprofit organization founded by a group of involved citizens dedicated to improving food security, providing nutrition education, and reclaiming and building food sovereignty within the Blackfeet Nation.

We have been working to grow our programs to meet the needs of the Blackfeet Nation. We had just opened our doors at the end of 2019 when the COVID-19 pandemic hit in March of 2020.

FAST Blackfeet operates the Ō'yō'·p' or “We Are Eating” Pantry, a need-based pantry that distributes nutritious and culturally relevant foods like buffalo meat and local produce. Since the pandemic, we developed a mobile pantry to serve our elders so they did not have to risk their health by leaving their home.

This program has since expanded to reach anyone who is unable to get to the pantry, adding over 100 households.

The Food Pharmacy Program was developed to educate people on how to prepare the foods distributed by our pantry and to stay healthy by eating well, and provides a fresh produce voucher to use at the local grocery store. We also run the Growing Health Program to support aspiring producers by providing garden beds, supplies, and education on growing, harvesting, and preparing traditional tea plants, which are purchased by the pantry to provide the community with teas for their health.

Over the last few years, the total number of households we serve has grown from 60 households to approximately 500 households. When people visit our pantry, they report the prices of food in the reservation grocery stores has skyrocketed, especially fresh fruit and vegetables. Our customers will also travel to Great Falls or Kalispell to stock up on groceries, however the rising cost of gas has made this more difficult.

We are thankful for the collaboration of our community organizations that support our work; including Southern Peigan Health Center, HIS, BCC, Browning Public Schools, Browning Lumber, C&C Meats, Piiikani Lodge Health Institute, Glacier Family Foods, Teeples IGA, and many more. We also are thankful for the partners outside of our community, like MFBN and North Valley Food Bank, who help us source food, and support and mentor our work.

Helena Food Share



The longevity of Helena Food Share as a trusted organization and the consistency of service, even during the pandemic, has created a reputation that enables us to offer essential programs to support anyone in need of food resources. For 35 years, our partnerships with food providers and other service agencies, and our dedicated volunteers, staff, and donors have helped us create and fund programs to address rising food insecurity in the greater Helena area.

In addition to offering weekly and monthly shopping at the Lewis Street Pantry in Helena, we provide Mobile Pantry service in East Helena, Lincoln, and various congregate housing locations. Other programs include weekly distribution of Kid Packs to Helena and East Helena preschool, elementary, and middle schools, providing weekend nutrition to kids at risk of hunger. We distribute high-calorie Emergency Food Packs for local agencies to share with anyone they encounter who has not eaten for some time. Programs specifically for adults over 60 provide nutrition through Senior Commodities and Senior Farmers Market coupons.

Nutrition is central to our programs. Partnerships with St. Peter's Health provide 'Food Is Care' and 'Food Farmacy' grant programs to address the specific health needs of patients facing food insecurity. The Helena Food Share Garden, partnerships with local growers and Helena Community Gardens, and the Grow-A-Row initiative bring garden-fresh produce to the pantry and Farm Stand each

week of the growing season. The Charlie Cart mobile kitchen demonstrates healthy cooking options with Montana-grown foods in the pantry and in schools.

During the pandemic, other than closing one day per week and offering grab-and-go and curbside service, programs and services remained essentially the same. We returned to customer-choice shopping in the pantry in June 2021. We continue to balance social distancing inside the pantry with waiting lines outside.

Service numbers fluctuated during the pandemic. Initially, the number of customers and households we were serving increased. Later, in 2021 we saw reductions likely related to multiple factors. Pandemic support checks provided additional income to many families in need, SNAP and unemployment support increased, and support for school meals provided free breakfast and lunch for all kids. The Farmers to Families program also made a difference. With benefits assisting some, we saw an increase in new customers due to reduced or changing employment or housing. We also know that some customers, especially seniors, chose not to come during this time out of an abundance of caution. Because of rising inflation, the need for all programs has increased, returning to or exceeding pre-pandemic numbers. We encounter new customers whose yearly salary is higher than we've seen before but can no longer cover their expenses, especially housing.

Helena Food Share consistently utilizes donor funds at a high level, with 90% of funding spent on food assistance and program support. This has built trust with donors who generously support their neighbors through Helena Food Share programs. Food and financial donations increased during the pandemic and continue as the effects of inflation increase food insecurity in our community.



Get Involved

To join Montana Food Bank Network in advocating for policies to address hunger and its root causes, 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 MFBN and other organizations fighting hunger across the state. Whether you donate 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

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A special thanks to [Bounty of the Bridgers Campus Food Pantry](#), [Boys & Girls Club of Richland County](#), [Center Pole Food Pantry](#), [Chouteau County Health Department](#), [Custer County Food Bank](#), [Family Service Inc.](#), [FAST Blackfeet](#), [Flathead Food Bank](#), [Helena Food Share](#), [North Valley Food Bank](#), [St. Labre Youth and Family Services](#), and [St. Vincent de Paul of North Central Montana](#) for sharing the Montana Hunger Survey with the people you serve. The 652 responses to the survey are a testament to your dedication and commitment to better understanding and fighting hunger in Montana.

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2023

Montana Hunger Survey



Montana Food Bank Network is Montana's only statewide food bank and member of Feeding America. Our mission is to end hunger in Montana through food acquisition and distribution, education, and advocacy.

To learn more or make a donation visit mfbn.org.

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