



in partnership with

Columbia Falls 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: March 15, 2023

Location: Columbia Falls Food Bank, Columbia Falls

Topics: SNAP, Rural food accessibility

Participants: 8 individuals who utilize SNAP and/or the Columbia Falls Food Bank

Key Takeaways

Factors Impacting Food Security

- Participants are facing limited incomes that do not cover the cost of living. While some participate in SNAP, others did not qualify based on income, despite struggling to make ends meet.

"It is hard when you're a senior. I've always had money, I've always made good money, and I don't anymore. I'm getting more social security than a lot of people are getting. But it's still not doing it. I got my income cut in half when my husband died and I got cut in half again when I had to stop working."

- Many participants noted that they or their family members have medical conditions that limit their ability to work and require substantial care giving from family members.

"I have a 31-year-old son that lives with me. He has pancreatitis and he gets it so bad that he's in the hospital for four or five days at a time. They took the tail of the pancreas and spleen out. So he really can't work. If he does, he loses his Medicaid and his enzymes are \$4,000 a month. I can't afford it. He hates not working."

"My husband, he had to quit work ... because he had Parkinson's. Now, he has gotten so bad he can hardly walk. He can't do anything with his hands because he shakes so bad. I caught him the other day in the kitchen trying to cut a piece of cheese and his hand just shakes. I'm afraid he's going to cut his hand off."

- Participants discussed the challenges affording adequate food, including those requiring specific diets. Dietary needs can be difficult to meet on a limited budget, negatively impacting health and well-being.

"The price of food if you require any kind of a special diet - like I'm supposed to eat a lot of fresh, unprocessed foods and cook my own meats and stuff too, so that I'm not getting the fat. It's hard when you don't have food stamps because you can't get those fresh vegetables and fresh fruit...Your doctor tells you to get certain foods. It's like, how can you. I can't afford it. You tell them that and they look at you."

- One participant noted frustration with the challenge of affording food while recovering from a substance use disorder.

"[Eating] is the best, fastest way to get dopamine levels without using chemicals, right? So, obviously when you're in recovery, you need food."

- Participants are often caring for grandchildren, adult children with disabilities, or other family members, further stretching limited resources.

"My granddaughter says, 'How come we can't buy this and how come we can't buy this?' She likes fruits and vegetables and we don't have the money."

- Some participants noted increased difficulty accessing programs or applying for jobs due to lack of internet access and computers.

"I think there's a real barrier that exists that there's a lot of technical [online] information but we don't see it, we're not privy to it...It's affecting those that are in my situation where I don't have a computer.."

SNAP Access Barriers

- Many participants noted challenges connecting with a caseworker and that the call back system from the Office of Public Assistance (OPA) did not work for them.
 - Participants noted that the next available return call is often many days later,
 - return calls from the OPA are often not at the scheduled time,
 - and that the OPA number displays as a restricted phone number, so clients often don't answer.

"They're like, 'Well, that's just an approximate time frame.' And it's like, well, people that work actually have to not be at work when you call them back."

"They say your appointment time for this call back is like five or six days later. That's ridiculous."

"It was impossible, and I do mean impossible to get ahold of OPA there in Kalispell, and I just flat couldn't get through on the phone. I think I got a call because it said restricted. I missed it. I don't know because I can't [return the] call to see if somebody was trying to reach me. That's how bad it is."

SNAP Benefit Levels

- Participants expressed frustration that their benefits would decrease if they got a raise or increase in Social Security. Many participants also noted confusion over reductions to benefit levels that they did not understand.

I'm retired. I've got all kinds of fun medical disabilities all of a sudden, and I was getting \$90 a month food stamps. But then they gave us a small raise in social security and they took my food stamps away."

"You make \$10 more, they take \$10 more away."

"We adopted [our great-granddaughter] when she was two months old. She's now 12. To get on SNAP, they gave me \$300...the first couple months. Then they gave me about \$400 a couple months later. Then I get a letter saying that, "Oh, we've overpaid you by \$2,000." So I'm still paying that back at \$10 a month out of my food stamps, which they gave me \$90 in December and January. They went down to \$37 in February."

- One participant's 17-year old son works and his income counts towards household income, affecting SNAP benefits.

"I don't get or qualify for food stamps anymore because my 17-year-old works. I have a low income anyway because I'm disabled, so he takes on a lot of responsibility already, and I carry all this guilt. I can't help him get ahead, I can't help him get a start."

Columbia Falls Food Bank

- Participants overwhelmingly appreciated the services offered by the Columbia Falls Food Bank, noting that the staff and volunteers are always friendly and helpful.

"This place is awesome. You come here and the people are gracious and they don't make you feel like you're given a handout. They're very good people here. I feel good when I come and see them all. They know who you are."

- Participants noted that the Food Bank typically provides an adequate amount of food for their families and has a good variety of products to meet dietary needs.

"My husband is big on the probiotics. Anything that has that natural bacteria. He has H. Pylori and so that affects him greatly. They save his life. We get a lot of yogurt from the food bank, which really helps tremendously."

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 Farm Bill and other relevant SNAP 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.