



in partnership with

**Fergus County Council on Aging and  
Central Montana Community Cupboard**

## 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:** April 6, 2023

**Location:** Fergus County Council on Aging, Lewistown

**Topics:** Commodity Supplemental Food Program (Senior Commodities), food pantry

**Participants:** 10 individuals who use Senior Commodities and/or the Central Montana Community Cupboard

## Key Takeaways

### Senior Commodity Boxes

- Many participants expressed their appreciation for the program.

*"...kudos to whoever started it. I think it's a wonderful program"*

*"We appreciate the commodity boxes, because it helps us so much with the can goods and stuff."*

- Participants also noted numerous ways the program could be improved, including more variety of food items in the commodity boxes.

*"I think it's a wonderful program. I think it can be improved on. I inventoried three months boxes and I found out, I mean there's tons of duplicates every month. Instant mashed potatoes. And I'm going, how many seniors can eat all those mashed potatoes?"*

- Some of the logistics of the food box are challenging for older adults, including opening the cans and managing the heavy boxes.

*"What if people can't open cans? Because we must, out of our 20 or 22 items...there are a lot of cans... I'd fight. I would fight with my can for five minutes."*

*"Somebody helps you out with the box. Then you get home. You take just a few things out. And go in and out. In and out."*

- Participants also noted opportunities for the program to better meet the nutritional needs of older adults. Some participants expressed an additional difficulty in accessing foods that they could physically chew.

*"Some of the things I think are lacking are real cheese...I eat some differently than when you're cooking for a family - when there's just one person. I think crackers, bread should be in it. I think snack foods. I know older people eat maybe two meals a day. And at night it'd be nice to have something healthy to snack on. So seeds, nuts, walnuts, almonds, dates, all really good things for you. Popcorn, snack bars that are healthy. I just think these things are real lacking."*

*"I think they have to be really conscious of senior's diets. And two of the things that are in the boxes, and I call them 'needs' or 'nots'. Two of the things is juice. Man, seniors shouldn't be drinking all that juice. It's so full of sugar...And I protest the processed cheese. I just think...I want real cheese. I like real cheese."*

*"I'm diabetic and there's a lot of stuff that I just can't do anymore."*

*"We both have a problem between the two of us. We don't have a complete set of teeth."*

## Challenges Affording Food

- Many participants noted the increasing price of foods and not being able to afford the items they would like to buy, even on discount days.

*"Today was senior day and even on with it being senior day, we looked at things and said though that's too expensive. A couple of years ago we would've been able to afford it."*

- Participants shared that the rising cost of living affected their ability to feed themselves.

*"I moved away from here in 2012 and the rents were between three and \$400 a month. When I moved back in 2018, they were a thousand dollars a month. Same house, no improvements."*

*"I do pick up extra work here and there to help supplement the home. But yeah, it gets...gets pretty rough sometimes. It's really, really rough"*

- Many participants noted the increasing price of fruit and that they cannot keep up with the cost.

*"And you buy a bunch of bananas and they get home from school and you turn around and a whole bunch is gone and you're like I just bought that. Or a bag of apples that's \$5.00. And, literally, they can eat apples all day. My kids are really, really good about fruits and vegetables. They'll eat the little mini sweet peppers. A bag gone after school. They'll eat a head of broccoli raw. Gone after school."*

## Central Montana Community Cupboard

- Participants overwhelmingly appreciated the services offered by the Central Montana Community Cupboard, noting that the staff and volunteers are always friendly and helpful.

*"I don't ever feel judged walking into the Cupboard. And it's a really wonderful feeling to just walk in there and be like, "I need some meat really bad". It so expensive. And they're just, they're great. They're fantastic."*

- Participants noted that the Community Cupboard provides an adequate amount of food for their families and has a good variety of products.

*"Been out here for a few years. I've started using the Community Cupboard in addition to my food stamps and that's very helpful, because the food stamps [don't] last that very long and the Community Cupboard is pretty good...They supply me the little extra things that I need. I appreciate that."*

## Next Steps

Participants are willing to continue advocating through meetings with lawmakers and sharing their stories and perspectives, but would need resources like compensation 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 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.