



in partnership with
University of Montana
Food Pantry

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 8, 2023

Location: University Center, University of Montana

Topics: SNAP and food insecurity among college students

Participants: 10 students at the University of Montana

Key Takeaways

Food Insecurity Among College Students

- Students noted the difficulty to learn and succeed in school if you are unable to access adequate food.

"At its core, if you can't eat, you can't think to your full potential...[When I'm] eating better. I feel better, I can study better, I can perform better."

"I work two jobs. A condition of my scholarship is that I am a full-time student. So it's always a juggling game of keeping up with my assignments and making sure I understand my materials..."

- The cost of housing and lack of transportation were primary factors impacting food insecurity for students.

"Housing is a very difficult thing to come by in this town. And so I [had to] really budget out and stretch my dollars before I found out that I qualified for SNAP...Before [SNAP], I was maybe buying groceries once a month just to be able to afford my housing situation off campus."

"It takes me two hours to do a grocery shopping trip because I use public transit."

- Students participating in SNAP noted that SNAP helps them stretch their budgets and improve nutrition. Pandemic-related waivers for student eligibility helped more students access SNAP.

"Not only do I have to put less strain on the food pantry [since having SNAP], I can make better choices. Nutrition is the most important part."

"If I have an assignment or a midterm that I have to turn in, I have to call out of work just to catch up. [With the waivers], I'm not worried about, will my SNAP be denied because I'm working less than 20 hours."

Challenges Accessing or Participating in SNAP

- Many participants noted that the SNAP application and eligibility rules are confusing and information is not clear from caseworkers

"I have not had to fight so hard, every single time I have to renew my SNAP, as I have as a student. Student loans, Pell Grants, all of those things go directly towards paying for school. But I have to argue that it's not money that I'm receiving on top of wages, which is practically nothing, every six months. And I almost get denied every six months."

"About a year and a half ago, I applied for a SNAP, and they said I have to work more than 20 hours a week to qualify, and I only had 11 hours a week. Last month, I go into the pantry and I see this giant poster on the wall. It says, "You may qualify for SNAP if you have a work study job," which I did. I called SNAP and got the benefits. So I could have had that a year and a half ago if I knew, but I didn't."

"You might have three roommates, but you don't share meals with those three roommates. And so you should be marking yourself as a single individual, but they don't explain that."

"I didn't know that I could do my interview over the phone. And so I was worried about having to schedule out time. also don't have a car so I have to rely on public transportation and that's an added factor of time."

"I was on [SNAP] for a year. And then they sent me a letter that said that they had overpaid me and there was no transparency. I could never find out what I had done wrong. And then in the end they took my tax return and I could never find out what exactly happened."

- International students noted they do not qualify for SNAP and are not allowed to work more than 20 hours per week during the school year, limiting their income. Additionally, many international students do not have their own transportation.
- Participants noted the inadequacy of SNAP benefits, particularly with the rising cost of food

"With the amount [of SNAP] that I receive, I don't think I can even buy a full meal every meal. Like, do you need breakfast, lunch, [or] dinner? So I'm forced to miss something in between. Either big breakfast or eat a big dinner."
- Participants noted frustration that expenses such as car payments, health insurance, internet, and other costs of being a student are not counted as deductions in SNAP eligibility

UM Food Pantry

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

"I felt more relaxed when I started using [the food pantry]. A lot of my spending every month went into food, housing... It gave me some financial room to begin to relax as a student."

"As an international student, to move all the way across the country and come here without a stable source of resources, and to come and meet something like a food pantry, that's a lot of stress that is taken off from you."

"That's the beauty [of the UM Food Pantry]. In addition to being able to help with nutrition, you're able to find out things like [how to apply for SNAP] that really make a difference."

- Students noted there was a lack of knowledge about the food pantry among professors and University staff.

"Oftentimes I ask myself, 'If you sent out a poll to all the faculty and staff and asked them if they knew about the food pantry on campus and where it's located, what the hours of operations are...' I would be thoroughly surprised if even 40% of them [were] able to answer all three of those questions."

- Participants noted that they would like to see the food pantry provide more cultural foods, more produce, and more meats.

"For us international students, we have different kinds of foods that we eat. And so sometimes it's expensive to get the ingredients to the food that you want eat."

- Participants indicated that limited service hours may limit the ability of some students to access UM Food Pantry services.

- The food pantry faces challenges with limited space, budgets, and staff/volunteer capacity. The food pantry is also trying to keep up with a drastic increase in the number of students they are serving, further stretching limited resources. The pantry is striving to meet student needs to the best of their ability.

"I want to make sure that we continue to let people have as much food as they need, whatever it is, however often they want it."

-UM Food Pantry Staff

Next Steps

Many 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 this 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 and informing solutions to hunger.