



# FOOD SECURITY IN NEVADA

2/7/2013

Nevada's Plan for Action

*In March 2012, The Nevada Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) Grants Management Unit (GMU) implemented a strategic planning process intended to address food security in Nevada. The purpose was to bring together stakeholders across the state to develop a plan designed to increase food security in Nevada. This plan is a result of those efforts.*

## ENDING HUNGER BEFORE IT BEGINS

From the depths of the Great Recession, a movement to improve food security in Nevada has emerged. Over the past several months, leaders from government entities and the private sector have joined forces to better understand the root causes and negative impacts of hunger and to explore potential strategies to reduce it. The over-arching conclusion of this effort is that progress can be made through collaborative partnerships that weave separate threads together into a single, robust fabric.

From small, rural towns to inner-city neighborhoods, communities in Nevada possess an unrealized potential to strengthen sustenance and nutrition programs and ensure a robust and affordable food system for the entire state. This can include the promotion of local businesses that grow and distribute food to create economic vitality. Nevada's future can be one where farmers work with school districts to provide fresh fruits and vegetables for students' meals, and where neighbors coordinate with neighbors to start community-supported agriculture projects. It can be a place where service providers from across the state help their clients obtain food and nutrition resources, while also providing skills and information to prepare healthy, nutritious meals. By leveraging their strengths and relationships with one another, communities in Nevada can vastly reduce or eliminate the hunger gap.

The community food security movement encourages all members to invest and be active in the wellbeing of the community at multiple levels. Through a network of local and corporate supermarkets, farmer's markets, community gardens, and anti-hunger initiatives, Nevada can create a distinct food web that minimizes barriers to food access. This system enables more families to purchase nutritious and culturally-sensitive ingredients that allow them to prepare wholesome meals for children and the elderly. Beyond the family sphere, local institutions such as schools and health centers partner with other community actors, area farmers, social justice workers, and religious leaders to construct programs and services that improve the overall quality of life. This is possible in Nevada.

## MISSION STATEMENT

**IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF LIFE AND  
HEALTH OF NEVADANS BY  
INCREASING FOOD SECURITY  
THROUGHOUT THE STATE**

Difficult economic conditions in Nevada have led to an increase in the number of households that are food insecure, meaning that they do not have "access at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life for all household members." From 2007 to 2010, Nevada experienced a 50 percent increase from 10 percent to 15<sup>1</sup> percent in households that were food insecure, compared to the number of households prior to the recession (Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service; see chart on pg. 20).

## PRINCIPLES

- 1. Incorporate economic development opportunities into food security solutions.**
- 2. Use a comprehensive, coordinated approach to ending hunger and promoting health and nutrition, rather than just providing emergency short-term assistance.**
- 3. Focus on strategic partnerships between all levels of government, communities, and nonprofit organizations including foundations, private industries, universities, and research institutions.**
- 4. Use available resources in a more effective and efficient way.**
- 5. Implement research-based strategies to achieve measurable results.**



## A PROBLEM WE CANNOT IGNORE

Hunger is about missing meals – a coping strategy when there is not enough money to cover all of one's basic needs. Nevadans are missing a lot of meals. Most people are able to purchase some food through work or other income. Some people receive federal nutrition benefits, which add a few more meals. Some receive emergency or regular assistance from food banks, soup kitchens and food pantries, which contribute even more meals. After all these sources of food are counted up, more than 16 percent of Nevada's population still misses meals. Missing meals are the calculated number of meals/year that corresponds to the food budget shortfall reported by food-insecure individuals. In other words, this is the number of meals the food insecure could not afford to purchase in 2010. That's what we call the meal gap – 81,367,395 missing meals in Nevada, to be exact.

Too many people in Nevada are unaware of the food and nutrition resources and services that they are eligible to receive. Key informants noted that at least 50 percent of children in Nevada are eligible for free and reduced-cost lunch. This says a lot about the level of poverty in our state. Children who are hungry or poorly nourished are less able to focus on learning. Schools, child care centers, family day care homes, and after-school programs need to improve the meals they serve. The Healthy, Hunger-Free Children Act of 2010 requires school districts to meet new meal pattern requirements. School districts participating in the National School Lunch Program are currently implementing the new meal pattern. As many as twenty rural schools in remote locations lack the facilities and resources to participate.



A lack of good nutritional education leads many people in the state to spend money on less healthy fast food options instead of spending the same amount of money on locally produced sources of food that could be prepared at home and would be healthier. Some people who have food insecurity issues will try to take in as much food as possible without considering the nutritional value of the food they consume. This can also impact their children by leading them to form poor eating habits that will influence their food choices throughout their lives.

Children are not the only vulnerable population in Nevada. Insufficient access to healthy food reduces the health and wellness of children and adults in Nevada. The population of seniors in the state has increased over the past three years. When seniors retire and adjust to a fixed income based on Social Security, they may not be able to access all the foods they are used to purchasing. Inadequate access to fresh vegetables and fruit can prevent seniors from being as healthy as possible and drive up their medical costs.

Nevada's high desert environment and arid climate makes farming here more challenging. It takes a lot of water to grow and process food crops. Increasing production, processing, and the purchase of locally grown food in Nevada are essential to making healthy food accessible

and affordable for all Nevadans. Families that are economically insecure are especially vulnerable. The decline in the economy has forced people that are used to being self-reliant to reach out for help. Many people are asking for food now that have never had to ask for food before. A hungry workforce is less productive than one that is nourished and has access to healthy foods. Food security also affects how many people are attracted to work and live in Nevada. Insufficient access to food and other basic necessities of life will make people less likely to move to Nevada or stay in Nevada. If basic needs are not met, then it is nearly impossible for individuals to improve other areas of their life.

There are many logistical challenges in Nevada that impact food security. For example, Nevada is separated from California by a mountain range that is covered by snow in the winter. This can affect commerce and the movement of goods and people to and from this region. Some populations are particularly impacted by logistical challenges. Because they may have to travel greater distances to buy groceries, people who live in remote communities must sometimes add significant mileage expenses to the cost of obtaining their food. Some rural areas only have one place to buy groceries, which may contribute to higher food prices and less food variety. Because many seniors have reduced mobility, they may also have a reduced ability to access food. All of these logistical factors contribute to the variation of costs associated with obtaining nutritious products, and are particularly significant in Nevada.



Increasing gas prices put even more upward pressure on the cost of food. Some stakeholders have noted that “rural Nevada does not want to be dependent on Washoe and Clark Counties because, when resources shrink, the rural communities are hit the hardest as funding contracts back to the urban areas of Nevada.” Another food service provider stated that, “all of our services are in the Reno/Sparks area, but there are some clients that live outside of that area [who] are hard to reach because of the vast distances involved and the higher costs of transportation required to reach a small population.”

## **Hunger is Expensive for All of Us**

Hunger is a symptom of poverty and directly affects health. Basic nutrition is essential to be healthy. Inattention to this basic need indirectly increases or exacerbates the challenges and costs of other health care programs such as Medicaid, Medicare, mental health, general medical services and education.<sup>i</sup>

More than one in six persons (17 percent)<sup>i</sup> in Nevada is considered food insecure.<sup>ii</sup> Federal nutrition programs are designed to help address hunger and are beneficial to the state for the following reasons: they feed qualified hungry people, they improve health through improved nutrition, they bring back Nevada's tax dollars from the federal government, and they create jobs and generate economic stability.

Nevada lags behind most states in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) participation rates. According to a recent USDA report, even a small increase in the SNAP participation rate can make a big difference to Nevada's economy:

- In Nevada, the fiscal year 2009 SNAP participation rate for those eligible was 61 percent and there were about 333,000 participants.
- If the SNAP rate rose so that 27,000 more low-income people could participate, it would allow for \$16 million more per year in additional benefits to purchase nutritious food. In addition, this would bring \$16 million of federal dollars to the state.
- Every \$5 in new SNAP benefits generates \$9.20 in total community spending. As a result, almost \$30 million in total new economic activity would be generated in Nevada.<sup>iii</sup>

Food security—access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life—is one of several conditions necessary for a population to be healthy and well nourished.

While it is not mandated that breakfast be offered in schools, 90.6 percent of the Nevada schools that provide the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) also offer breakfast, ranking Nevada 29th in the nation. But, Nevada ranked last in the nation (51st out of all 50 states, plus the District of Columbia) in the percentage of students eligible who received both free or reduced price lunches and breakfasts.<sup>iv</sup> The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) also ranked Nevada last in the nation (53rd out of all 50 states, plus the District of Columbia, Guam, and Puerto Rico) for participation in NSLP with 47.1 percent of eligible children participating in the program and 52nd for participation in the School Breakfast Program (SBP) with 15 percent of the eligible children participating in the program. The national average participation for NSLP is 62.31 percent and the national average participation for SBP is 26.26 percent.

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<sup>i</sup> Percent may vary depending on year and source of data available

## Hunger is a Public Health Concern

The emergency food system was initially created to provide supplemental food assistance to individuals and families at risk of hunger. Over time, “hunger” has come to mean not just a lack of food, but a lack of access to healthy food, the kind that promotes health and wellbeing and guards against obesity, diabetes, and other diet-related illnesses. More than half of adult Nevadans (60.1 percent) were overweight or obese in 2010.<sup>v</sup>

## Rural Communities Hit Hard

Access to healthy food in Nevada varies by geographic area.<sup>vi</sup> Food insecurity is a top issue identified by both providers and community members throughout the state in the Interim Summary of Results of the Statewide Needs Assessment, conducted by the Nevada Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) Grants Management Unit (GMU). Identified concerns include:

- 1) Inadequate income to obtain food.
- 2) Lack of access to grocery stores due to the demographics (including geographic remoteness) of communities.
- 3) Lack of local access to public offices to apply for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).<sup>vii</sup>

## Some Experience Hunger at Higher Rates

Special populations can be particularly vulnerable and at risk to experience hunger. The percentage of Nevada households with food insecurity among children is 8.6 percent (2001-2007 average). Several studies indicate that children who are food insecure are more likely to have higher risks of health and developmental problems than children in otherwise similar food-secure households.<sup>viii</sup>

Breastfeeding has been acknowledged as the preferred feeding method for most infants. The Healthy, Hunger-Free Children Act of 2010 includes breastfeeding support and promotion as one of the specific services to be provided under the WIC Program. The WIC Program has established a goal to increase the number of postpartum women who participate in the program and breastfeed. However, the average rate of monthly participation in Nevada has declined from 58 percent in 2009 to 49 percent in 2011.<sup>ix</sup> This decline is likely due to funding as WIC is not an entitlement program but a discretionary eligibility program.

*I'm a senior. I have a Section 8 voucher and recently my rent was raised by Nevada Rural Housing Authority (NRHA) to almost half my income. I'm on social security and have a limited income. By the time I pay my rent and all my bills, I only have about \$100 left. I get food stamps but it doesn't go far because of my diet due to medical problems and allergies.*

*-Elko County Focus Group Member*



Nevada ranks 10th in the nation when it comes to senior hunger. As of 2010 (the latest year for which data is available), 16.5 percent of Nevada's seniors faced the threat of hunger, surpassing the national average of 14.85 percent.<sup>x</sup>

- 16.5 percent of Nevada seniors, age 60 and older, live in Threat of Senior Hunger in 2010. This equates to 78,421 seniors and ranks Nevada 10th worst in the nation for number of seniors at threat of hunger.
- Since the onset of the Great Recession in 2007 to 2010, the number of seniors experiencing the threat of hunger has increased by 34 percent.
- Data suggests that the Great Recession had more enduring effects relevant to food insecurity for older Americans. For example, the number of seniors affected increased 78 percent versus 39 percent for the portion of population younger than age 60.
- The increase in senior hunger will likely lead to additional nutrition and health challenges for the nation.
- The threat of hunger is more than three times higher among disabled seniors than among the retired.
- When one or more grandchildren live in the home, the threat of hunger for seniors greatly exceeds households with no grandchildren.
- The majority of seniors at threat of hunger have incomes above the federal poverty level (FPL).<sup>xi</sup>

As part of the development of this plan, 1,673 surveys were completed by Nevadans to help define the scope of the problem (1,622 English and 51 Spanish versions). Of Nevadans surveyed, 56 percent indicated that hunger was a big problem in their community. Surveys came from 14 of Nevada's 17 counties, reinforcing that hunger and food security is a big problem across the state. More than half of the respondents (58 percent) indicated they struggle almost every month to put food on the table, with an additional 34 percent responding that they struggle some but not every month.

In addition to the 1,673 consumer surveys that were completed, a separate survey for providers was distributed to representatives from organizations related to food security. Providers from the following nine counties returned 81 surveys: Carson, Churchill, Clark, Elko, Humboldt, Lyon, Mineral, Nye, and Washoe. Of providers surveyed, 56 percent indicated that hunger was a big problem in their community and 82 percent of providers indicated that more people are now seeking services than compared to the past.

Children, low-income working families, senior citizens, and single-parent households were the four populations that consumers identified as being most affected by hunger. These are also the top four populations that providers indicated that they provide services to most often.

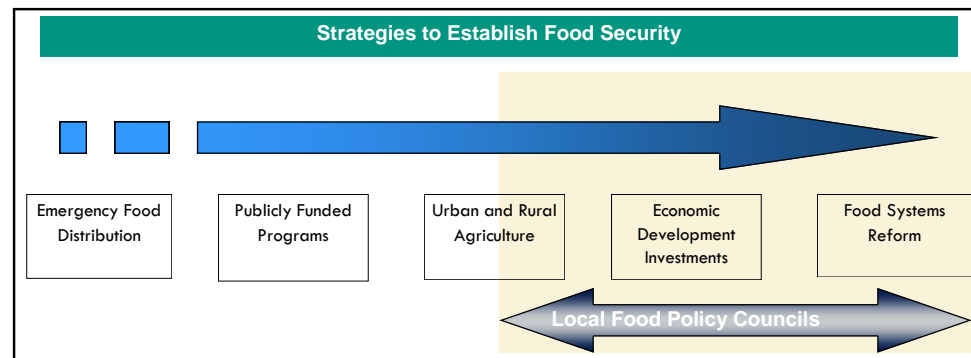




## Food Assistance Programs Have Short-term Impact

The relationships among the food system activities and strategies to establish long-term food security are complex. Nevada needs leadership to ensure the various programs function together effectively as a hunger and nutrition safety net, while building a system to ensure they complement and supplement each other. To that end, workgroups were developed to design and implement the strategic plan. The Grow Nevada workgroup addressed food issues related to economic development and agriculture business; Feed Nevada focused on eligibility, outreach, access, and nutrition education; Reach Nevada dealt with logistics, execution, purchase, storage, and distribution; and finally the Lead Nevada workgroup addressed policy and leveraging related to food security.

By crafting short, mid and long-term strategies, Nevada has created a plan to lead Nevada to food security.



## DESIRED SYSTEM

Making progress at anything usually requires two things: 1) knowing where you are starting from, and 2) knowing where you want to go. Research, focus groups, surveys, and interviews with key informants provided the workgroup members with a more comprehensive understanding of where Nevada stood in terms of food security. In response to survey questions, providers and consumers rated “food pantries and soup kitchens” and “SNAP” as two of the most effective programs at reducing hunger. Providers and consumers suggested the following strategies to address food security in Nevada. The responses to open-ended questions are grouped and summarized here.

**Improve and expand existing programs.** Suggestions included making it easier for people to access programs, and simply making more programs available to help people in need. More meals, neighborhood-based services, and streamlined eligibility were a few of the improvements suggested.

**Provide education and experiences that improve the health and decision making of children and their family around food.** Examples included health and nutrition education for all children K-12 and gardens in schools.

**Encourage donations and incentivize businesses to improve food use and food recovery.** Many identified the importance of reducing waste (the throwing away of food by businesses) and enhancing what is available for people to eat. More support from the private sector (e.g. business, or individuals) was identified as a potential solution.

**Get people to work.** Jobs are important because they allow people to generate the income needed to purchase food.

**Change policies.** Providers stressed the importance of changing restrictive policies that affect consumers and food availability.

**Provide financial education.** Financial education and budget counseling would help families with all of their needs, including hunger.

**Enhance collaboration.** People identified the need to develop solutions within and among community partners to leverage existing resources and innovative solutions.

*Being able to feed my family healthy and nutritious food is very important. It is just expensive. Having more business and jobs in smaller communities would be ideal.*  
-Lyon County Focus Group Member

**Support small businesses.** Several respondents suggested this strategy. One provider stated that this would considerably affect hunger.

The information from the community, coupled with the background and expertise of the workgroup members, helped them to articulate a vision for Nevada's future. The workgroups vision of a future food security system in Nevada included the following key attributes:

**Access** – All Nevadans would have an appropriate supply and convenient access to healthy and nutritious foods. Nevadans eligible for food and nutrition assistance would receive it in an efficient, timely manner. The system would include a “one-stop” or “single point of entry” approach to link people to a broad array of services they might need beyond food, such as jobs, housing, etc. Additional state staff would enable timely processing of federal assistance applications and help to avoid federal penalties. Staff could be cross-trained to help guide clients during the process and reduce duplication of effort. The one-stop-shop concept would alleviate the problem of services offered in silos and provide one location for determining eligibility for multiple programs based on one application.

**Availability** – Nevada's food security system would allow for a variety of healthy foods to be produced in the quantities required, transported when and where they are needed, and delivered at a cost that would be affordable, thereby improving economic viability so people can afford to purchase food along with their other basic human needs. It would provide access for Nevadans who are frail, disabled or live in remote, rural areas of the state. To ensure availability, the system would have the capacity to produce, process, distribute, and purchase the goods in an affordable and sustainable manner while creating jobs and financial stability.

**Collaboration** – State leadership would work closely with service providers, growers, education and economic development to support all efforts to improve food security in Nevada. This would involve an increased level of engagement between stakeholders and an efficient leveraging of existing resources. An ideal system should operate efficiently and effectively. Existing components of the food security pipeline would be connected and work together to meet the needs of the community rather than operating in silos. This collaborative approach to addressing food security would also involve the sharing of data and information in order to link services to needs in the various communities. Duplication of efforts would be reduced by such a system, because it would track the frequency, type, location and volume services received by individuals for each partner. Data from the system would inform community planning and decision making. Such a food system would increase access, community engagement, and entrepreneurial food and agricultural activities, and improve the capacity of farmers to grow and sell food in Nevada.



**Education and Outreach** – Awareness in communities about the issues related to food security and available programs are essential. An improved system would help teach the public about principles of nutrition as well as key food security strategies that they could support. Public education campaigns would be used to promote the use of SNAP to purchase seeds, plants and fruit trees, as people are generally unaware of this benefit. SNAP education would also increase utilization of Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) benefits at Farmers' Markets and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs. Farmers and retailers would understand how to become an EBT vendor. Public education campaigns would also be used to increase acceptance of and encourage Nevadans to choose healthy, local foods and understand how to prepare them.

**Sustainability** – Sustaining a food security system requires a vision and leadership from the highest office in the State. This begins by ensuring that sufficient infrastructure is in place to promote access. A strategic financing approach would leverage all available resources, build infrastructure and technology to maximize federal funds to bring in new resources. Pursuing opportunities for efficiency in purchasing, transportation and delivery would lead to sustainability and a coordinated food security pipeline. All parts of the system must recognize the importance of continually improving their operating models in order to remain as efficient and effective as possible. Regular assessment of whether public and private resources are being used effectively is essential to sustainability.



These characteristics are not intended to be a comprehensive list of attributes required to make Nevada food secure. Instead, this list of characteristics was designed to serve as part of a larger vision for the food security system in Nevada. Achieving this system can be realized through the accomplishment of the following goals: