



## CHILDREN'S ALLIANCE

# *Hungry in Washington: Acting on the Evidence*

September 2003

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*"For two and a half days in November I had nothing to give them."*

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## *Summary*

Six years of USDA-Census Bureau surveys of hunger in America consistently place the state of Washington near the top. The latest data indicates that 4.6% of Washington households, or nearly 104,500 families, experience hunger and 12.5%, or 283,925 households, are food insecure (1999-2001). This is the reality despite a variety of steps taken at the state and local level to address problems revealed fifteen years ago by Governor Booth Gardner's Task Force on Hunger.

Many of the recommendations of Governor Gardner's Task Force have been implemented, yet hunger persists in our state. We attribute the deficiencies of these public policy initiatives to:

- Continued skepticism that hunger is a major problem in Washington.
- Decades of policy designed to keep Basic Food Program (food stamp) caseloads low.
- Varying commitment by schools and communities to increase access to child nutrition.
- Continued lack of full funding for the WIC program
- A food bank system that despite best efforts cannot fill the hunger gap.

We find that, despite an abundance of evidence from an array of reliable and creditable sources, the first step toward ending hunger in Washington comes down to generating the political will to get the job done. In other words, we must accept that there are hungry people in Washington. Believe it and act on that belief. Specific recommendations for improving existing public mechanisms to address hunger are found on page 8 of this report.

Why does hunger persist in Washington? How are our children affected? How can childhood hunger and obesity co-exist? This paper seeks to clarify these issues and offer a blueprint for action.

## **Background**

In the 1980s, hunger was on the rise in America. Here in Washington, food banks that opened in the wake of massive Boeing layoffs found that demand didn't stop when the hiring began again. As the federal government backed away from acknowledging domestic hunger, foundations and policy organizations began to do their own research into hunger. Governor Gardner's Task Force on Hunger piloted a new methodology called the Community Childhood Hunger Identification Project (CCHIP), applying scientific research methods to measuring hunger, and found that 20-40% of low-income families in both rural and urban areas of Washington experienced hunger that reached the children in the household. As many as 20% of children in the Yakima and Wapato areas went to bed hungry, and on a regular basis. Many parents skipped meals so their children could eat.

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These findings spurred the Task Force to make a set of 21 recommendations, primarily focused upon improving access to public food assistance programs: Food Stamps (now called the Basic Food Program), school lunch and breakfast, WIC and community options including the Summer Food Service Program, and the Child and Adult Care Food Program.

*Despite implementation of many of these recommendations, childhood hunger persists.*

## **Food Insecurity**

In 1995, after decades of indifference at the federal level, the US Department of Agriculture and the Census Bureau joined to conduct annual surveys of food insecurity in America. "Food insecurity" is a term developed to describe households financially stretched to the point where they cannot be certain that all household members will not go hungry. The survey also measures "food insecurity with hunger," describing a household where at least one family member goes hungry at times because there is not enough money for food.

The survey tool, which owed much to the CCHIP methodology, uses a series of questions to classify households as food secure, food insecure and food insecure with hunger.

The first report, based on 1995 data, ranked Washington number three in hunger. Policy makers expressed skepticism, although other surveys at the time confirmed high rates of hunger in Washington. Department of Social and Health Services surveys indicated that significant numbers of families experienced hunger in the months after leaving TANF assistance. The Urban Institute's Survey of American Families, the largest privately funded effort to measure the impact of welfare reform, revealed that 20% of all families, and more than 47% of low-income families in the state, were worried about or experienced difficulty affording food.

All of these surveys were administered at a time when the Washington economy was booming. What would happen when the economy went bust?

Subsequent USDA-Census Bureau reports, now averaging three years of data to develop state-level estimates, continued to report Washington in the top five for hunger.

Rankings for food insecurity with hunger:			Rankings for food insecurity:		
1.	Oregon	5.8%	1.	New Mexico	14.6%
2.	<b>Washington</b>	<b>4.6%</b>	2.	Texas	13.9%
3.	Utah	4.6%	3.	Utah	13.8%
4.	Idaho	4.5%	4.	Oregon	13.7%
5.	Alabama	4.3%	5.	Montana	13.2%
6.	New Mexico	4.2%	6.	Louisiana	13.2%
7.	Montana	4.0%	7.	Mississippi	13.1%
8.	Florida	4.0%	8.	Idaho	13.0%
9.	Alabama	3.9%	9.	Arizona	12.9%
10.	Arizona	3.9%	10.	<b>Washington</b>	<b>12.5%</b>

USDA-Census

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Nationally, food insecurity dropped from 11.3% to 10.4%, and hunger from 3.7% to 3.1%, between the periods 1996-98 and 1999-01. Washington's food insecurity also dropped from 13.2% to 12.5%. However the hunger rate came down only slightly, from 4.7% to 4.6%.

The Oregon Public Policy Center, using USDA data for the period 1998-2000, conducted further analysis of sub-populations, revealing that rural areas in Washington had a rate of food insecurity that is 22%, nearly twice the statewide average. The Center also estimates that 18.8% of the state's children, or 286,000 kids, live in households that are food insecure. Although national data outlines higher rates of food insecurity among single mother households with children, African American and Hispanic households, sample sizes for Washington did not allow accurate estimates for discrete populations.

Seeking answers to why Washington and Oregon are consistently at the top of the list for hunger, ECONorthwest, an economic consulting firm with offices in Seattle, Portland and Eugene, found that Washington's hunger rate is linked to recent years of high unemployment, high housing costs and high mobility rates.

Since 2000, Washington has battled one of the highest joblessness rates in the nation. With so little affordable housing, about one in every five Washington renters spends more than half of his or her income on housing (1999-2001 data).

ECONorthwest found that about 20% of the people in Washington reported a different address in 2000 from their address in 1999, a mobility rate that is nearly twice that of stable, eastern seaboard states such as Pennsylvania and New York. Researchers say that the mobility rate is a good measure of economic shocks such as divorce, unemployment and eviction. Washington ranks 6<sup>th</sup> most mobile on a top 10 list dominated by rapidly growing western states.

Add to these findings, a long term instability in resource-based industries (mining, fishing, timber and agriculture), and the result is that rural areas are most hard hit. Ironically, the workers who harvest our fruits and vegetables are among those who suffer hunger the most.

## ***The Impact of Hunger on Children***

A June, 2002, report from the Center on Hunger and Poverty at Brandeis University provides a summary of available scientific research on the consequences of hunger for children.

- There is strong evidence that children in households lacking access to food are more likely to be in poor health and are more susceptible to certain illnesses and infections, including sore throats, colds, stomachaches, headaches and iron deficiency anemia. They are also more likely than adequately nourished children to be hospitalized.
- Adverse consequences are not limited to physical health. Studies show that hunger in children affects psychosocial health, behavior and learning. Children in hungry households are more likely to have higher levels of hyperactivity and aggression as well as withdrawn behaviors. They are also more likely to need mental health services and special education services.
- Several studies indicate that cognitive achievement and school performance are adversely affected by lack of food. Children from hungry households do not perform as well on certain academic achievement tests and are more likely to have repeated a grade. They also have higher rates of tardiness and absences from school.

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### **The Paradox: Childhood Hunger and Obesity**

*There has been much media and research attention in recent years on the problem of childhood obesity. The percentage of children who are overweight has more than doubled over the past two decades and continues to rise fairly rapidly. In some instances, obesity and hunger can co-exist in the same households and the same individuals. While there is little hard research for why this phenomenon occurs, particularly for children, experts have several hypotheses and proposed mechanisms.*

*One theory is that households at risk for hunger choose to buy lower quality food with less variety before reducing the quantity of food. They may avoid feeling hungry but their food is often high in empty calories and fat [and leads to a positive energy balance]. Another theory is that obesity is an adaptive response to ups and downs in food availability. When food is available people eat more than they normally would to prepare themselves for times when food is scarce. Thus hunger and obesity can result from a lack of regular access to high quality nutritious food.*

*There is new evidence that participation in food programs puts food insecure children at lower risk for overweight and obesity. A study published in the August, 2003, issue of the Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine shows that among food insecure school-aged girls participation in the Food Stamp Program and school lunch and breakfast programs was inversely associated with risk of overweight.*

## **Washington's Public Response System:**

Most key public-sector programs established to address hunger are federal programs, administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Program	Participating in WA	Federal Funding per Year
Food Stamp Program	350,373	\$317,651,773
School Lunch Program	481,219	\$113,760,486
School Breakfast Program	131,136	\$23,903,069
WIC	152,106	\$95,275,507
Summer Food Program	35,997	\$2,434,731
Child & Adult Care Food	65,900	\$31,439,613
TEFAP		\$9,300,000
Commodity Supplemental	3,000	\$150,755
WIC Farmers Market	30,000	\$334,000

Although most funding for these programs comes from the federal level, Washington's legislature has made key investments in the above programs to leverage additional federal funds, make up for Congressional cuts, or expand access. These investments have included state funding for WIC, Basic Food Education and Outreach, school breakfast, summer meals for kids, the Child Care Food Program, and community food banks and distribution programs. Although some of these funds have been cut back over time (WIC and child care, notably), continued investment despite the state's budget woes demonstrates the understanding legislators have about the importance of anti-hunger initiatives.

## **Why Are Children in Washington Still Hungry?**

Hunger continues to haunt our state despite a variety of efforts over the last 15 years, initially spurred by the Governor's Task Force on Hunger. Currently key advocacy players include the state's Anti-Hunger and Nutrition Coalition, the Children's Alliance, Washington Citizen Action, the Washington Food (Bank) Coalition, food distribution organizations, and myriad community food pantries and church-based efforts.

Key problems persist that prevent all of our families from accessing the nutrition assistance they need:

### **1. Continued skepticism that hunger is a major problem in Washington.**

Nearly ten years of federal government and private research should be enough to put this issue to rest. Thousands of kids are hungry in Washington!

### **2. Decades of policy designed to keep Basic Food Program (food stamp) caseloads low.**

Despite the key role that food stamps play as our first line of defense against hunger, the program's branding as a "welfare program" has resulted in an overemphasis on preventing administrative errors instead of providing access, and a history of poor customer service at local offices that keeps eligible families away from the assistance they need.

Recent DSHS attempts to make the program more accessible fail to address critical issues and take full advantage of new Congressionally-approved options to reduce paperwork, provide transitional benefits to families leaving TANF, allow former drug felons to receive food assistance, and raise the vehicle value limit to a reasonable

amount. A commitment made in 2002 to simplify reporting requirements for most recipients has yet to be implemented despite legislative approval.

As a result, only an average of 61% of potentially eligible households in Washington receive food stamps. Raising participation to 85% would bring in \$125 million added federal dollars to our state's wounded economy annually; 95% participation would raise that figure to \$177 million. These dollars are spent in local communities. USDA research also indicates a significant multiplier effect from increased food stamp benefits flowing into communities in times of recession.

### 3. Varying commitment by schools and communities to increase access to child nutrition.

Washington schools do not take maximum advantage of federal child nutrition resources. Decisions on important nutrition issues like provision of school meals and competitive foods in the schools rest in the hands of 300 local school boards.

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- The 1989 School Breakfast Mandate, which requires all schools where 40% or more of students qualify for free-or reduced-price meals to offer the School Breakfast Program, has loopholes that should be filled. In Washington 130 elementary schools do not offer school breakfast, although there are low-income children attending each of these schools.
- In recent years, the amount of food sold outside of the federal school meal programs has increased dramatically. A 2001 Report to Congress entitled "Foods Sold in Competition with USDA School Meal Programs" notes that the sale of 'competitive foods' is having a negative impact on the nutritional integrity of and the student participation in school meal programs. These foods and beverages are often high in calories, fat, sodium and sugar and low in essential nutrients. Competitive foods stigmatize participation in the school meal programs, affect the viability of the school meal programs and convey a mixed message to students about good nutrition and the value of healthy food choices. While some districts and individual schools have chosen to replace the unhealthful competitive food with more healthful alternatives, many more continue to undermine the federally funded school meal programs by offering junk food and soda to students throughout the day.
- Summertime is hungry time for many children. "For many of our kids, this is it. They eat breakfast and lunch at our program and those are their meals for the day. When we see them again in the morning, they are starving." Karen Hayduk, Lake Quinault School District. Yet only 12% of children who receive a subsidized school lunch during the school year receive summer meals in their communities. This despite state start-up and subsidy funds, private foundation investment in enrichment activities to accompany meal programs, and federal funding for food and administrative costs. A recent federal provision allowing school districts to offer summer meals under their school lunch contract has resulted in an increase of organizations providing summer meals, however many more do not.
- The Child Care Food Program insures that children in care receive nutritious meals. CCFP is also a key component in funding for child care. Unfortunately, inadequate funding and burdensome paperwork diminish the value of CCFP for kids and providers.
- Child Nutrition Reauthorization, currently underway in Congress, could add further paperwork burdens to school districts by requiring additional verification

of school lunch applications. Findings of recent pilot projects show that additional verification does little to achieve program integrity, and in fact denies assistance to eligible children.

4. **Continued lack of full funding for the WIC program.**

Although research has shown that WIC participation saves \$3-4 in Medicaid funding for each \$1 invested, Congress has not yet fully-funded the program. Each year advocates fight for an appropriation that covers all women and children currently on the program. Administrative funding for the program has not increased despite increased mandates for screening and referral.

Washington's WIC caseload is 152,000. However not all eligible women and children are served. In some communities, cuts in public health budgets have jeopardized continued provision of WIC services, and significantly reduced out-stationing to remote communities. Despite Department of Health efforts to help local agencies streamline their programs, looming public health deficits and lack of action on administrative funding by Congress likely means loss of program access for many women and children.

The WIC Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (WIC FMNP) provides 30,000 WIC families with the opportunity to purchase locally grown fresh fruits and vegetables. At the same time, the program is supporting 350 family farms in Washington.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture provides a 3:1 match for this program. The state of Washington spends slightly more than \$125,000 per year on the program to gain \$334,000 in federal funding. Currently the program is available in only 16 counties with farmers, WIC clients and farmers markets in the remaining 23 counties eager to participate. Because of limited federal funds, many states are waiting in line to reap the benefits of this simple, effective program.

5. **Food banks can't fill the hunger gap.**

Washington has a well-developed network of food distribution programs and communities food pantries. Last year families made over 6 million visits to food assistance programs, an increase of over 700,000 visits, or 13%, from 2001. The ability of local food programs to meet the needs of hungry families varies tremendously due to varying levels of community support. This means that while food banks are a tremendous help to hungry families, they cannot provide a uniform level of access to food statewide.

Local food programs play an important role in linking families with other assistance. Yet there has been no comprehensive effort to design access and outreach materials or approaches for use by community food pantries.

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# Recommendations:

1. **Accept that there are hungry people in Washington. Believe it and act on that belief.**
2. **Basic Food Program**
  - Immediately implement the options in the 2002 Farm Bill that allow for simplified reporting and Transitional Benefits.. Transitional Benefits are particularly important in this economy when families leaving cash assistance may find the road to stable employment rocky.
  - Raise the vehicle limit. The vehicle value limit for food stamp eligibility in Washington continues to be \$4,500, although 42 other states have raised their limit through several options approved by Congress over the last few years. Washington's continued low limit makes the program inaccessible to many newly unemployed families and denies needed assistance to many children.
  - Apply for a waiver for face-to-face interviews, currently available through USDA, and continue to fully explore and implement alternatives to office interviews for working families and others.
  - Fully exempt drug felons from the 1996 Congressional ban on their receipt of food assistance. This ban affects children when affected families receive less food assistance than they need to prevent hunger.
  - Continue to support Basic Food Program Education and Outreach. Employ all state agencies with contacts in low-income communities as outreach vehicles for information on the program and program eligibility.
  - Open the doors at Community Service Offices to food stamp applicants and make every effort to insure that administrative barriers do not stand between those families and food assistance.
3. **Child Nutrition Programs**
  - Close the loopholes in the school breakfast mandate. Explore new mandate options including a 100% mandate for breakfast and lunch in elementary schools.
  - Strongly oppose current Congressional proposals on to increase paperwork for school districts and tighten access to school meals.
  - Restrict or prohibit student access to competitive food (i.e., junk food and soda) on all school campuses statewide.
  - Mandate summer food programs in high-need communities.
  - Explore ways to make the Child Care Food Program work better for children and child care providers.
4. **WIC**
  - Provide a stable, sufficient, dedicated and equitable public health funding source to support essential public health services, which includes WIC.
  - Continue to protect state investment in the WIC program.
  - Support full federal funding for WIC and a culturally appropriate food package.
  - Continue to protect state investment in the WIC Farmers' Market Nutrition Program and expand the program to additional counties.
5. **Emergency Food**
  - We defer to food distribution programs who have much greater ability to make recommendations on these issues.
  - It is of concern, however, that the network of community food pantries is not used in a more planned manner as an outlet for information on other benefits and food assistance families might be able to receive. This is not the fault of food pantries – whose main job is providing emergency food – but of public systems that have failed to work collaboratively to provide information and tools enabling pantry volunteers to help clients find other, potentially more stable, sources of food assistance.