

FOOD INSECURITY IN MISSOULA COUNTY:
Barriers, Opportunities, & Solutions
2007

A research study completed by the Finding Solutions to Food Insecurity Project

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May the journey continue.

Maxine Jacobson

Chris Rugeley

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INTRODUCTION

A Context for Understanding the Report

THINKING BROADLY ABOUT FOOD INSECURITY AND HUNGER

Worldwide, 854 million people are hungry. Everyday almost 16,000 children die from hunger-related causes – one child every five seconds.¹ In the United States, the richest country on the planet, 35.1 million people live in households where they struggle to put food on the table. One-third of these people are children. The number of people living in the most destitute conditions, those considered to have “very low food security,” increased in 2005 from 10.7 to 10.8 million.² If we look globally, we learn that our planet’s food supply produces enough to feed every person at least 4.3 pounds of food per day.³ The irony of our current food system is that it produces an abundance of food at the same time that it produces food insecurity. Answering the question about why some people have access to healthy, nutritious food while others go hungry is a complex issue. Some have sought to increase agricultural production so that supply would be hearty while food prices would remain low. When this approach has failed, food assistance strategies have intervened.

Attempts to address food insecurity have been a part of the U.S. landscape since the beginning of the 20th century. Soup kitchens and bread lines were initiated as temporary solutions to temporary economic recessions: “Federal food assistance programs were first developed in an effort to jointly attack problems of farm surpluses and city poverty during the Depression.”⁴ Memoirs of the era call attention to the paradox of need in a land of plenty where “breadlines were knee deep in wheat . . . and the plain man’s instinctive resentment of poverty surrounded by shops bursting with food and farms smothered under their own productive surplus.”⁵

¹ See Hunger Facts produced by Bread for the World at <http://bread.org/learn/hunger-basics/>

² These statistics come from the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC). In the most recent USDA report the word hunger was changed to “very low food security.” See *Household Food Security in the United States, 2005* by Mark Nord, Margaret Andrews, & Steven Carlson at www.ers.usda.gov/publications/err29/

³ See Food First Institute for Food and Development Policy at <http://www.foodfirst.org/pubs/>

⁴ Allen, P. (1999). Reweaving the food security safety net: Mediating entitlement and entrepreneurship. *Agriculture and Human Values*, 16, p. 118.

⁵ For a thorough history of food assistance in the United States see Poppendieck, J. (1983). Hunger in America: The definitional process and its consequences. *Humanity & Society*, 7(4), 373-394.

The Food Stamp Program, the largest food assistance program in the United States, was first initiated in 1939 but ended four years later when unmarketable food surpluses and widespread unemployment were no longer a problem.⁶ Eighteen years passed before the Food Stamp Program was revitalized with a pilot program initiated during the Kennedy Administration in response to the “discovery” of hunger in America. The gains made by people with limited income over the next twenty years eroded in the early 1980s as policy makers began to cut social safety net programs including those designed to promote food access. Food stamp benefits decreased to levels considered inadequate for the maintenance of a healthy, nutritious household diet. Over the course of the last three decades “nearly every advanced industrialized country . . . has been shedding its responsibilities for social welfare. In five of these nations – the U.S., the U.K., Canada, Australia, and New Zealand – governments have been changing welfare systems while neglecting the growing issue of hunger and food insecurity.”⁷

Without a doubt the most significant policy in the last century with the broadest implications for people with limited income was enacted in 1996, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). It made substantial cuts to a number of significant safety net programs such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), Supplemental Security Income (SSI), and the Food Stamp Program (FSP). In fact, half of the savings projected from the new welfare reform policy came primarily from decreased spending for the Food Stamp Program. These changes placed the responsibility for holding up the social safety net squarely on the backs of communities: “Policymakers have elevated the role of the private emergency food network, extolling volunteerism and charity, expecting them to fill the gaps caused by the cuts.”⁸ Community nonprofit and faith-based organizations are filling the gap left by a receding social contract; however, these organizations are finding it more and more difficult to keep up with the increased demand for their services. A recent study estimates that there are almost 33,000 food pantries and over 5,000 emergency kitchens in the United States.⁹ Food banks, food pantries, and soup kitchens, once temporary solutions to address inadequate access to food, have become institutionalized in communities across the United States.

⁶ For a full history of the Food Stamp Program see www.usda.gov/fsp/rules/Legislation/history.htm

⁷ Allen, P. (1999). Reweaving the food security safety net: Mediating entitlement and entrepreneurship. *Agriculture and Human Values*, 16, p. 118.

⁸ Ibid, p. 118.

⁹ Ohls, J., Saleem-Ismail, F., Cohen, R., & Cox, B. (2002). *The emergency food assistance system – Findings from the Provider Survey*. Vol. 2, Final Report. Food Assistance and Nutrition Research Report No. 16-2. Washington, D.C.: USDA, Economic Research Service. Retrieved at www.ers.esda.gov/publications/fanrr16-2

WHAT IS FOOD INSECURITY?

The terms used to label a social problem are always important clues to how a problem is defined and who has the most power to define it. The words used to describe hunger, or what one person in the study referred to as “the dull, aching sensation in your stomach that makes it hard to fall asleep at night,” have shifted and changed throughout the short history of the United States. The idea of “food insecurity” came into popular usage sometime in the 1980s when it replaced hunger and malnutrition as the key concept for describing conditions where people lack adequate access to food. Policymakers at the time thought it more judicious to begin identifying the conditions that led to hunger before the damaging effects were irreversible.¹⁰ Today, we have noticed yet another shift in the way a social problem is defined. The word “hunger” is no longer included in the USDA’s annual report on household food security in the United States. Instead, “food insecure without hunger” has been replaced by “low food security” and “food insecure with hunger” is now referred to as “very low food security.”¹¹ Many contend that while the word *hunger* has been removed from the USDA’s vocabulary, hunger still persists in the United States today.

At its most basic level, “food insecurity is not knowing where your next meal will come from and having to make tough choices between food and other daily needs such as housing, utilities, and medicine.”¹² According to the USDA, people living in a food secure household have access at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life for all household members. At a minimum food security includes: (1) the ready availability of nutritionally adequate and safe food, and (2) the ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways without having to resort to emergency food supplies, scavenging, stealing, or other coping strategies.¹³ Food insecurity arises in the context of poverty and financial insecurity. To put it another way – low wage paying jobs, plus high housing, medical care, child care, utilities, and transportation costs equal food insecurity. Food is a commodity and without money to purchase it, food remains out of reach.

“Food insecurity is not knowing where your next meal will come from and having to make tough choices between food and other daily needs such as housing, utilities, and medicine.”

-FSFI Steering Committee

¹⁰ Allen, P. (1999). Reweaving the food security safety net: Mediating entitlement and entrepreneurship. *Agriculture and Human Values*, 16, p. 118.

¹¹ Nord, M., Andrews, M., & Carlson, S. (2005). *Household food security in the United States*. Retrieved at <http://www.ers.usda.gov/Publications/ERR29/>

¹² This definition of food insecurity was developed by the Finding Solutions to Food Insecurity steering committee.

¹³ Nord, et al., *Household food security in the United States*, p. 2.

FOOD INSECURITY IN MISSOULA COUNTY

According to an estimate by the U.S. Census Bureau, 14.5% of Missoula County residents lived below the poverty line in 2006.¹⁴ Although the unemployment rate has dropped from 4.3% in 1997 to 2.9% in 2006, Missoula County residents' wages continue to be low. Findings from a survey completed by the Northwest Area Foundation in April of 2007 indicate that although the federal poverty line is set at \$20,444 for a family of four (two adults and two children), more than half of the Montanans surveyed felt that \$40,000 would be a more accurate estimate of what it would take for a family of four to have a "basic standard of living in their community."¹⁵ Based on the 2007 Missoula Housing Report, housing foreclosures were up 22% from 2005 and only 11% of households can afford a

median priced house, which has risen 9.7% from \$185,000 in 2005 to \$205,000 in 2006.¹⁶ More and more Missoula County residents are finding themselves hard pressed to purchase a home in the current housing market.

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In the years immediately following the enactment of PRWORA, participation in the Food Stamp Program, for example, declined. Participation rates in the United States between 1996 and 2000 dropped from 25.5 million people per month to 17.2 million. Currently food stamp participation

rates are on the rise. They began climbing in 2002 and have almost reached their pre-1996 level. Of the 38 million people who are eligible for food stamps in the United States in any given month, 25 million participate which means that 35% of people who are eligible are not receiving food stamp services.¹⁷ The participation rates for Montanans who are eligible for food stamps is 58%, which indicates that 42% of people who are eligible are not enrolled in the Food Stamp Program.¹⁸ In comparison, the number of people using food stamps in Missoula County has increased from 5,820 in 2000 to 8,780 in 2006, a 51% increase over the last 6 years. At the same time that the number of people receiving welfare assistance in Missoula County is decreasing, the use of programs that offer emergency assistance to

¹⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, QuickFacts for Missoula County, Montana can be retrieved at <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/30/30063.html>

¹⁵ See *Struggling to Make Ends Meet*, survey results commissioned by the Northwest Area Foundation, 60 Plato Boulevard East, St. Paul, Minnesota, 55107.

¹⁶ 2007 Missoula Housing Report: Current Knowledge, Common Vision: Growing a Missoula to Treasure. Retrieved at <http://www.missoularealestate.com/index.php/fuseaction/market.main/ID/0d95f240>

¹⁷ A summary of food stamp participation rates for 2005 can be retrieved at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/oane/MENU/Published/FSP/FILES/Participation/Trends1999-2005Sum.pdf>

¹⁸ Montana DPHHS Statistical Reports, State Fiscal Years 1999-2006.

address utility costs, housing costs, and food shortages is increasing. For example, the Missoula Food Bank served 27,446 people in 2000, and in 2005 it served 36,825 people. The number of visits increased to 41,375 in 2006. Similar phenomena have been noted at other programs that provide services to people with limited income such as the Salvation Army, Missoula 3:16, the Poverello Center, the Clark Fork Christian Center, and Missoula Aging Services.

THE COMMUNITY FOOD SECURITY MOVEMENT

Failed attempts to address food access issues in the United States have led the way for the emergence of a new approach to food security over the last decade. The community food security movement seeks to provide a more comprehensive, systemic approach to food security that links production and consumption and focuses on building a sustainable food system from existing individual and community resources.

Community food security is “a situation in which all community residents obtain a safe, culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through a sustainable food system that maximizes community self-reliance and social justice.”¹⁹

The idea of a community food system claims a broad stroke. It means having access to healthy, nutritious foods as research studies increasingly link diet to health-related problems such as cancer, obesity, and food borne illnesses.²⁰ It means creating more direct linkages between local producers and consumers and ensuring the stability of local farm and ranching operations based on sustainable practices. It also means developing policies to promote local food production, processing, and consumption. The idea of a community food system integrates environmental and social justice. It provides a vision for addressing community food security on multiple levels – individual, social, political, economic, and environmental, with no one level any more important than the others and all fundamentally linked.²¹ “Achieving food security requires both a process of developing self-reliant food systems and

Community food security is “a situation in which all community residents obtain a safe, culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through a sustainable food system that maximizes community self-reliance and social justice.”

-Michael Hamm & Anne Bellow

¹⁹ See Hamm, M. & Bellow, A. (2003). Community food security and nutrition educators. *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, 35(1), 37-43.

²⁰ See Nestle, M. (2002). *Food politics: How the food industry influences nutrition and health*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

²¹ Feenstra, G. (2002). Creating space for sustainable food systems: Lessons from the field. *Agriculture and Human Values*, 19(2), 99-106.

a political effort to achieve justice and equality.”²² However, efforts to achieve justice and equality must be addressed at both the local level and beyond. Not all food issues are created locally and therefore not all food issues can be addressed locally.²³ Although the community food security movement focuses on community strengths and localizing the food system, legislative action beyond the community is necessary to fully address issues of food insecurity, especially in a rapidly globalizing world economy.

OVERVIEW OF THE REPORT

Food Insecurity in Missoula County: Barriers, Opportunities, and Solutions presents key findings from the Finding Solutions to Food Insecurity Project (FSFI). The report is organized into three parts:

*Part I: Understanding Food Insecurity from a Service User Perspective.*²⁴ This part of the report presents a service user perspective on food insecurity. Chapter 1 presents background information on the Missoula County Community Food Assessment and the food consumption research that provided the impetus for the FSFI Project. It provides background information on the project and describes the research orientation and its rationale. Chapter 2 presents the design, methodology, findings, and recommendations from the Service User Survey developed by steering committee member to identify the factors that make services easy or difficult to use; why people decide not to use services, and; the changes survey respondents recommended to address barriers to food access. Chapter 3 reports the findings from a town hall meeting facilitated by steering committee members and attended by people with limited income.

*Part II: Cost of Living Issues and Food Access from a Service Provider Perspective.*²⁵ This part of the report presents three different methodological approaches that were used to gather information about cost of living issues and food access from people who administer service programs that provide services and direct service staff employees. Chapter 4 summarizes the findings from individual interviews with administrators and executive directors of service

²² Allen, P. (1999). Reweaving the food security safety net: Mediating entitlement and entrepreneurship. *Agriculture and Human Values*, 16, p.127.

²³ Ibid, p. 121. Allen points out that while issues of food insecurity are manifested at the local level, they are often rooted in much larger global political and economic structures impenetrable by local activism alone.

²⁴ For consistency sake, in this report we use the words “service user” as a term to describe people who have limited income and must avail themselves of additional resources beyond what they can generate themselves in order to survive. People who use services are also referred to as clients, consumers, or recipients but these descriptors may not necessarily fit for everyone.

²⁵ For consistency sake we refer to people employed in service programs as service providers.

programs that provide housing, food, utilities, and other forms of assistance to people with limited income. Non-profit, governmental, and faith-based organizations were represented. The interviews provided an opportunity for administrators to shed light on policies, procedures, and funding constraints that affect service provision. Chapter 5 reports on the methodology, analysis, and findings from the Service Provider Survey, developed and administered by steering committee members, which explores the perspectives of people who work directly with service users. Chapter 6 presents the findings from a town hall meeting conducted with program administrators and direct service staff. The town hall meeting gave service providers an opportunity to share their practice wisdom, to discuss what works to reduce barriers to program access, and to generate solutions to address food insecurity locally.

Part III: Finding Common Ground and Moving Toward Action. This part of the report summarizes the study's findings and ideas generated by service users and service providers for addressing food insecurity in Missoula County. Suggestions for change illustrate the common ground shared by service users and service providers. Although service users and service providers are often viewed as antagonistically opposed groups, the findings suggest they share striking similarities in terms of what they perceive as the barriers to and opportunities for food security. We envision opportunities as those intersecting points where two groups share common ground. Creating opportunities for change is an important way to frame the research findings. Next steps for achieving a Missoula County where everyone has access to food are discussed. This report intends to stimulate conversation and move us forward toward increased community dialogue as we strive towards a sustainable and socially just food system that benefits all Missoula County residents.

PART I

Understanding Food Security from a Service User Perspective

OVERVIEW

Part I of *Food Insecurity in Missoula County* explores food insecurity from a service user perspective. The Missoula County Community Food Assessment, summarized briefly in Chapter 1, found that cost of living issues, especially low wages, severely compromise access to healthy, nutritious food for people with limited income. It also discovered that federal nutrition programs are underused, while at the same time, local, nonprofit, “emergency” food programs are overused. These findings launched the Finding Solutions to Food Insecurity Project (FSFI). Our primary objectives were to investigate the barriers to and opportunities for food security in Missoula County and to ensure the inclusion of people with limited income in the research and solution building processes. Background information on the project and a description of community-based participatory research, the research orientation that guided our work, are explained in Chapter 1.

Trying to make sense of why some assistance programs are used more than others and moving forward to address this requires an understanding of the barriers to using federally funded programs such as the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), and the Food Stamp Program (FSP). It also requires knowing what makes programs that are overused more accessible. Improving access to services is one way to improve access to food. Furthermore, the people who use services, or try to, or perhaps even decide not to, are an important source of information on what works and what needs to change. Service users are all too often left out of the decision making processes that concern their lives.

In Chapter 2 we draw on service users’ experiences with assistance programs to expand our understanding of service program utilization and to generate solutions grounded in their experiences. We developed survey items and questions for a town hall meeting we hoped would be sensitive to and responsive to the experiences of others who struggled to feed themselves and their families. A survey allowed us to learn about the experiences of more people than possible in individual interviews or focus groups. Surveys have a much broader reach. They also assure confidentiality, an important factor considering the experiences of

people who apply for services and find themselves trading their private lives for bread, electricity, and a roof over their heads.

To compliment the survey, a town hall meeting with service users was planned and conducted. Focus groups were incorporated within this structure. The town hall meeting provided an opportunity for direct human contact and the potential for creating the “all in the same boat” phenomenon. People discover they are not alone and others share similar human experiences. They learn new strategies from fellow participants about ways in which to cope with limited resources.¹ The town hall meeting and its findings are discussed in Chapter 3. Combined, the two methods gave the study breadth and depth.

Given the direct connection between food insecurity and financial insecurity, improving access to food through assistance programs is the first line of defense against hunger. However, tackling issues of social justice and social inequity that form the basis of food insecurity and hunger in the United States must go hand-in-hand with first line efforts for change to be sustainable. All too often policies formulated to address poverty and its resultant effects, such as hunger and food insecurity, have been built on images of people with limited resources portrayed as lazy, shiftless, and greedy, who if given the opportunity, will fill their own baskets and never consider the needs of others. These images have helped to fuel punitive policies that have exacerbated poverty instead of ending it. Altering images of people with limited resources calls for a shift in the ways we develop policy. Recognizing the particular expertise of people who have firsthand knowledge of daily struggles to make ends meet and respecting the contributions they have to make towards creating more effective policies are necessary first steps. People who bear the greatest burden of unsustainable policies ought to have a voice at the table in shaping new possibilities for affecting change.²

¹ See Chung, I. (2003) Creative use of focus groups: Providing healing and support to NYC Chinatown residents after the 9/11 attacks. *Social Work with Groups*, 26(4), 3-19. Chung provides a fascinating and innovative twist on focus groups by conceptualizing them as opportunities for people to share common ground, connect with each other’s humanity, and exchange coping strategies and resources.

² Bennett, F. & Roberts, M. (2004). *From input to influence: Participatory approaches to research and inquiry into poverty*. York, UK: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

CHAPTER 1

Learning from the Missoula County Community Food Assessment

INTRODUCTION

This chapter sets the foundation for understanding the Finding Solutions to Food Insecurity Project's objectives and the methods used to complete the study. The Missoula County Community Food Assessment (MCCFA) was initiated in the spring of 2003 to increase our understanding of all aspects of Missoula County's food system – growing, harvesting, processing, packaging, transportation, marketing, consuming, and disposing of food.¹ The project was completed in the fall of 2004 and provided the community with its first assessment of the local food system. The idea to complete a study focusing on the barriers to and opportunities for food security in Missoula County came directly from the recommendations generated from the MCCFA.

THE MISSOULA COUNTY COMMUNITY FOOD ASSESSMENT

The Missoula County Community Food Assessment (MCCFA) began as a joint (ad)venture between two faculty from the School of Social Work and the Environmental Studies Program at the University of Montana who shared an interest in food issues and community-based research.² The MCCFA enlisted the participation of students interested in learning about and promoting community change in the food system and a steering committee of community members representing a broad range of food and farming interests. These included representatives from the city/county health department, local farming and land management, emergency food assistance and state and federal government-sponsored food programs, and advocates for alternative energy, families with limited income, welfare rights, and sustainable transportation. The research questions that guided the MCCFA were:

- What is needed for viable and sustainable, commercial food production in Missoula County? What are the existing assets and barriers to creating a more viable and sustainable production system?

¹ The reports from the MCCFA, *Our Foodshed in Focus: Missoula County Food and Agriculture by the Numbers* and *Food Matters: Farm Viability and Food Consumption in Missoula County* can be retrieved at www.umt.edu/cfa

² See Jacobson, M. (2007). Food matters: Community food assessments as a tool for change. *Journal of Community Practice*, 15(3), in press. The article provides a more thorough description of the MCCFA.

- What concerns do Missoula County residents of various income levels have about food (including quality, access, transportation to food outlets, cost, eating behaviors and choices), and what do they perceive as the county's food-related assets?

Multiple methods were used to complete the MCCFA including survey development and administration, focus groups, and telephone and face-to-face individual interviews. Information was gathered from farmers and ranchers, community residents of various income levels, Laotian Hmong farmers' market vendors, and people with limited income who struggled to feed themselves and their families. The project produced two reports, a resource guide, and a two-sided poster which was disseminated throughout the county.³ The

project took approximately 16 months to complete and was highly successful specifically because it brought food issues to the forefront in Missoula County and increased efforts to connect consumers and local producers of food. Key food consumption findings for people with limited income included frustration with the lack of access to high quality foods and the tough choices they faced when having to make decisions about whether to "heat or eat."⁴ Fundamentally tied to these tough choices was the high cost of living in Missoula County and how it compromises people's ability to have access to a healthy diet.

A number of changes occurred as a direct result of MCCFA. These included the adoption of a joint city/county government resolution to increase the security of the local food system; the formation of a multi-stakeholder, food policy coalition (Community Food and Agriculture Coalition - CFAC) to

address community needs related to food and agriculture in a comprehensive way; and the award of a USDA Community Food Solutions Grant in September of 2005. The USDA grant provided funding to develop and maintain CFAC, to create a cooperative community market to bridge the gap between local producers and consumers with limited income, and to complete additional research on agricultural viability and food access in Missoula County.

The MCCFA enlisted the participation of a broad range of community members who represented different aspects of the local food system, however, advocates for welfare rights

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

and for families with limited income represented the voices of people who struggle everyday to put food on their tables. The FSFI Project discussed in this report sought to ensure the participation of people with direct experience of food insecurity in the fact finding and solution building processes. One of the project's primary objectives was to work *with* people who had firsthand knowledge and experience with using services.

Academic researchers alone can not fully address food insecurity and the problems associated with it. "Academic knowledge can only be partial, indirect, informative, and exploratory. It lacks the firm footing in raw reality that turns knowledge into a mobilizing force capable of leading to action."⁵ Over the past few decades there has been an increased interest in community-based participatory research, an approach that focuses on local issues and enlists community members most affected by the issue at hand as partners in designing and conducting the research.⁶

COMMUNITY-BASED PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH

Community-based participatory research (CBPR) is much more than a "research method." It is a fundamentally different "orientation" to research, one that promotes democratic principles and supports the idea that generating knowledge ought to be an inclusive process where new leadership is developed, and where a community's capacity to tackle other issues is enhanced. CBPR responds to the challenges and limitations of traditional research approaches. Some of these include the failure of traditional approaches: (1) to generate knowledge that meaningfully addresses locally identified problems and concerns of daily living; (2) to account for the exploitative legacy of research *done on* indigenous people and the lack of trust of researchers in indigenous communities today; (3) to come to grips with the health, environmental, and social disparities experienced by people based on race, class, and gender, and how these disparities continue to plague communities around the globe; and (4) to recognize and value the voices of community residents whose lived experiences make them invaluable contributors to sustainable community and social change.⁷

CBPR strives to generate new knowledge but also to educate participants about more than the issues at hand. It requires that participants be willing to challenge deeply held

⁵ This is a direct quote from Joseph Wresinski, founder of ATD Fourth World, an organization whose mission is to promote the rights and participation of people with limited income in community life. Information on ATD Fourth World can be accessed at <http://www.atd-uk.org/>

⁶ See Israel, B., Eng, E., Schulz, A., & Parker, E. (2005). *Methods in community-based participatory research for health*. San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons. Minkler, M. & Wallerstein, N. (2003). *Community-based participatory research for health*. San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons.

⁷ See Jacobson, M. & Rugeley, C. (2007). Community-based participatory research: Group work for social justice and community change. *Social Work with Groups*, 30(4), 21-39.

assumptions about race, class, and gender based primarily on their own limited and partial views of reality. CBPR requires a willingness “to go the long haul”⁸ and remain committed to a difficult, enlightening, emotionally taxing, arduous, exhilarating, and transformative process through generating recommendations, and developing action plans and creating community change. CBPR is not for everyone nor is it the preferred approach for all research studies but it was the best fit to meet the philosophical and participatory goals of the FSFI project.

THE FSFI PROJECT

The Finding Solutions to Food Insecurity Project used community-based participatory research (1) to investigate the barriers to and opportunities for food security in Missoula County, Montana and (2) to ensure the inclusion of community members with direct experience of food insecurity in the research process.

Choosing the meeting location, ensuring wheelchair accessibility, and establishing an infrastructure of support that values everyone’s contributions was essential to the long-term sustainability of the project.

The project began in the fall of 2005 with a small coordinating committee of representatives from the Missoula Food Bank, the Poverello Center, the North Missoula Community Development Corporation, and The University of Montana’s School of Social Work. The project was one component of a larger effort to create a more sustainable local food system in Missoula County. For the first four months, coordinating committee members collaborated to recruit a steering committee of county residents with firsthand experience of food insecurity. Steering committee members informed all aspects of the project. They helped design and conduct the research and generate recommendations to address food insecurity in Missoula County.

Twelve steering committee members were initially recruited through contacts with local service organizations. Attendance at monthly meetings varied throughout the life of the two-year project. Recruitment, however, continued throughout the first year. The most fundamental yet challenging principle informing the project was the importance of creating the necessary infrastructure to sustain people’s participation. Barriers to participation exist on a number of levels including personal, institutional/political,

⁸This expression is borrowed from a book written by Myles Horton appropriately titled, *The Long Haul*. (1998). New York: Teachers College Press. Horton was a teacher and an activist who used participatory methods to address a multitude of long standing, ingrained social problems including racial discrimination.

economic, cultural, and technical.⁹ Choosing the meeting location, ensuring wheelchair accessibility, and establishing an infrastructure of support that values everyone's contributions was essential to the long-term sustainability of the project. Taking these factors into account, the project provided childcare, transportation, food, and a modest stipend to remunerate steering committee members for the time they spent at monthly meetings. We developed a system where steering committee members who helped conduct the research outside regularly scheduled monthly meetings would be reimbursed via food vouchers at the newly forming Missoula Community Co-op. Furthermore, we negotiated an arrangement with the local Office of Public Assistance (OPA) to assure steering committee members that remuneration from the project would not affect welfare benefits for those who were receiving them. In addition, OPA agreed to count participation in the project toward work hour requirements for Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF).¹⁰

Initially, meeting topics included arriving at collectively agreed upon decision making and conflict resolution strategies, learning about food insecurity from the firsthand experiences of steering committee members, and teaching about a variety of research methods that would be compatible with a community-based participatory research orientation. Once these tasks were accomplished two subcommittees were established that convened outside regularly scheduled monthly meetings to decide what research methods would be used to meet the project's objectives, and to establish timelines and plans for gathering information. One subcommittee focused on addressing the strengths and challenges of accessing local emergency food programs and federally-funded food assistance programs, while the other subcommittee addressed cost of living issues (i.e., high housing costs, low wages, and high health care costs) that were compromising people's ability to gain access to healthy, nutritious food.

To achieve its aims, community-based participatory research draws on the full gamut of research methodologies. Projects can include both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis methods.¹¹ Adhering to the philosophical principles of CBPR, however, means (re)thinking how particular research methods can be implemented within a framework

⁹ See Beresford, P. & Hoban, M. (2005). *Participation in anti-poverty and regeneration work and research: Overcoming barriers and creating opportunities*. York, UK: Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Retrieved at <http://www.jrf.org.uk/>

¹⁰ We are indebted to Jennifer Carter , the Executive Director of the regional Office of Public Assistance at the time the study was conducted, for helping us work out the details of these arrangements.

¹¹ Minkler, M. & Wallerstein, N. (2003). *Community-based participatory research for health*. San Francisco: John Wiley and Sons.

guided by the principles of participation and sharing power while attending to issues of difference and privilege and their effects on all aspects of the research process. This means challenging notions of researcher objectivity and neutrality and questioning taken for granted assumptions about the strategies used to implement particular research methods.

STUDY LIMITATIONS

Every research study has its limitations. The information presented in this report can not be generalized to other communities in Montana or other programs and services across the state, nor does it represent the voices of all service providers and service users. The project and its findings tell a story about the perspectives of local service providers and service users, where they differ and the common ground they share. Although the samples for each particular method used to gather information may be small, the true test of the study's veracity is the degree to which there appears to be consistency across the different methods used to gather information. Inspiring and catalyzing change in Missoula County's food system and promoting dialogue to address the barriers to food security and to support the opportunities that already exist is the true intent of this report.

CHAPTER TWO

Accessing Services and Assistance

INTRODUCTION

This chapter reports on the design, administration, data analysis, and major findings of the Service User Survey. Throughout June of 2007, surveys were administered to 461 people who use services in Missoula County to address food, housing, healthcare, utilities, and other basic needs. The purpose of the survey was to gather information about the services people have used, what makes them easy or difficult to access, and what changes people would recommend to improve access to services. Gather information from people who use services is crucial to a comprehensive understanding of food insecurity in Missoula County.

SURVEY DESIGN, METHODS, AND ANALYSIS

Designing the Service User Survey

The survey was designed by the FSFI Steering Committee. Surveys used to gather similar information in communities across the United States were reviewed; however, survey design was informed largely by steering committee members' experiences with using services. Survey questions were formulated that addressed why people in need decide not to apply for services, challenges related to income eligibility guidelines, and other perceived barriers to accessing services. The survey also asked what changes respondents would recommend to improve access to services. The survey contained both open- and closed-ended items. Prior to administration, it was piloted with a small group of service users at a local food assistance program. Changes were made to the survey based on the feedback received.

Administration Methods

In May of 2007, letters were sent to program administrators or staff at 15 organizations asking for their help with the administration of the Service User Survey. Contacts had previously been made with 11 organizations through their attendance at a town hall meeting (see Chapter 6). The following organizations administered the survey: Missoula Food Bank, Partnership Health Center, Poverello Center, Missoula County Office of Public Assistance, Salvation Army, Missoula City-County Health Department, Missoula Housing Authority, Human Resource Council, Blue Mountain Clinic, Missoula 3:16, and the YWCA of Missoula.

All surveys had a cover letter attached which informed potential respondents that their ability to receive services would not be affected if they chose not to complete the survey. Two different methods were used to administer the survey: (1) Surveys were distributed by steering committee members in the reception areas of the Missoula Food Bank and Partnership Health Center. The purpose of the survey was explained and participation was requested; and (2) Surveys were placed on a table in the reception areas at the remaining organizations. Survey administration was completed in July of 2007.

About Survey Respondents

Four hundred and sixty-one service users completed the survey. A purposive sampling method was used.¹ Seventy percent of the respondents were female and 30% were male. The age of respondents ranged from 18 to 86 with an average of 39 years. The median² household size was 2 with a range from 1 to 14. Almost 28% of respondents lived alone. Forty-six percent lived in households with at least one child. While the number of children ranged from 1 to 9, the median number of children residing in households was 1 and only 6.3% of households had more than 3 children. Almost four-fifths of survey respondents were White (78.7%), meaning 21.3% were nonwhite. Recent population estimates from the State of Montana Census and Economic Information Center³ for 2006 indicate that 6% of Missoula County's population is nonwhite. Comparing the results of the Service User Survey with these estimates indicates that people of color may be disproportionately represented among the people who struggle to make ends meet in Missoula County. These statistics support recent research findings that point to social and health disparities based on race/ethnicity, class, and gender. These disparities "have been associated with sociostructural factors such as poverty, racism, minimal public infrastructure, and lack of employment opportunities."⁴

Forty percent of all respondents reported completing some college education and 33% had completed high school or a GED. Only 8.5% of respondents had less than a high school

¹ Purposive sampling is used when there is a predefined group one seeks to gather information from. With this type of sampling, one is never assured that the information gathered is representative of, in this case, all service users in Missoula County.

² The median is a number denoting that 50% fall above that point and 50% fall below. Sometimes it is more precise to use the median than the mean (average) because extreme numbers pull the mean in one direction or the other and present an unrealistic impression of the sample.

³ See Montana Department of Commerce, Census & Economic Information Center at www.census.gov/popest/datasets.html

⁴ See Minker, M. & Wallerstein, N. (2003). *Community-based participatory research for health* (p. 8). San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

degree. Fifty-six percent of respondents used their personal cars as their primary means of transportation while the remaining respondents used a variety of methods including walking, biking, bus, taxi, and carpooling. Forty-four percent of the 461 respondents were employed. Of this group, 52% were working full-time and 48% were working part-time. The majority worked one job (83%), while 17% worked two or more jobs. It is important to note that although many respondents were working, they continued to struggle to meet their basic needs. According to the Montana Department of Labor and Industry, “Workers with more than one job are more likely to earn less than \$30,000, even with the combined wages from multiple jobs.”⁵

Survey Data Analysis

Surveys were analyzed using SPSS-15, a computer statistical analysis program that aids in organizing, compiling, and analyzing both qualitative and quantitative data. Frequencies and percentages were conducted on the quantitative survey items. Responses to open-ended survey items were typed verbatim and content analysis was used to arrive at dominant themes and sub-themes.⁶ Content analysis was conducted by three separate reviewers to ensure reliability in the data analysis process.

FOOD INSECURITY AND CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

Seventy-seven percent of survey respondents reported that they or other members of their family skipped meals or cut the size of meals in the last 12 months because they lacked sufficient funds to purchase food. Caught between meager budgets and the high cost of living in Missoula County, “getting by” requires making enormous sacrifices, especially for households with children. Respondents remarked, “Our child comes first!” They pointed to the fact that while they may skip or cut the size of their meals, they go to great lengths to ensure that their children always have enough to eat and in some cases, they shelter their children from the harsh reality of food insecurity. One parent reported, “I skip meals but the kids don’t even know.” Another explained, “We have to skimp often on food intake. I don’t eat so I can make sure my son can eat.” Low wages and the high cost of living in Missoula County forced many respondents to make tough decisions about where to allocate limited resources: Should they

“I skip meals
but the kids don’t
even know.”
-Service user

⁵ See *Montana at a Glance*, Montana Department of Labor & Industry. Retrieved at www.orfactsoyourfuture.org

⁶ See Strauss, A. & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications. The authors provide a thorough description of content analysis.

pay the rent, buy medication, or fix the flat tire on the car? Moreover, respondents made frequent comments about sacrificing their own food needs for their children.

Table 2.1 illustrates the reasons that affect people's ability to eat well listed according to percentage rates. Sixty-one percent of respondents endorsed low wages as the most compelling factor. They mentioned low wages, lack of employment, and the difficulty of living on a fixed income as key factors hindering their ability to eat well.⁷ In the words of one respondent, Missoula County's wages "don't add up to enough to pay bills, get gas, and buy food. It's very frustrating." Another respondent remarked, "With the cost of bills, rent, and insurance we can barely make it and I work full time and extra if I can." Yet another respondent stated, "It's kind of frustrating being called 'middle class' but not being able to afford food."

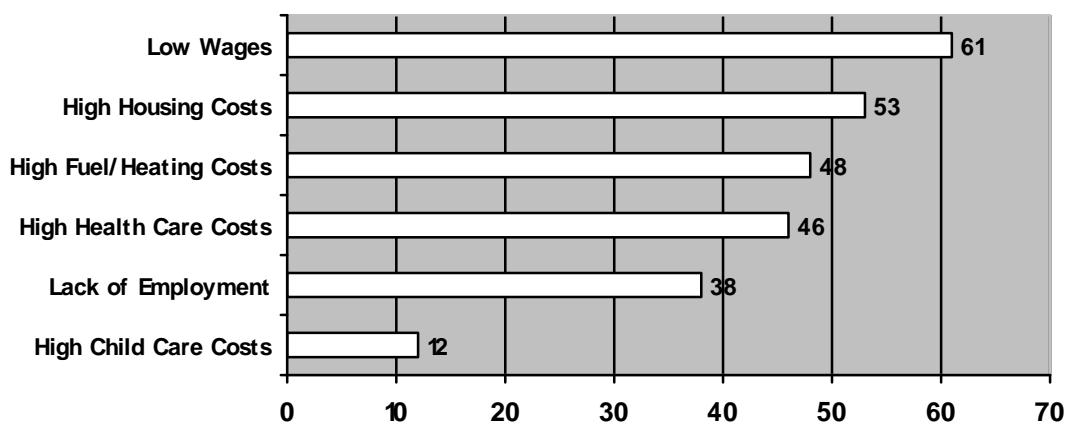


Figure 2.1: Percentage Rates of Factors that Affect People's Ability to Eat Well

The second most frequently endorsed item was high housing costs followed by high fuel/heating costs, and high health/medical costs. One respondent said, "I think something needs to be done about affordable housing in Missoula." As reported in the Introduction, with only 11% of households able to purchase a median-priced home, many are forced to "cut [their] food budget quite dramatically" and "portion food to save for rent."⁸ In the words of one respondent, "Sometimes you need a roof more than food." As the price of gasoline continue to rise, paying utilities throughout the winter is becoming increasingly

⁷ The survey items that were used to create Table 2.1 were created as single items with yes or no responses. Therefore, the percentages in the table do not add up to 100%.

⁸ See 2007 Missoula Housing Report –*Current Knowledge, Common Vision: Growing a Missoula to Treasure*, retrieved at www.missoularealestate.com

difficult. One respondent remarked, “I am still struggling to pay my back owed utilities from winter and it’s almost July.”

ACCESSING SERVICES OR CHOOSING NOT TO

Accessing Federally Funded Programs versus Local Nonprofits

A number of services exist to help address the effects of Missoula County’s low wages and high cost of living, particularly when it comes to food. One survey item asked respondents what services they were using and/or had used in the last 12 months to address these issues. Of 433 total responses to this item, the most striking was the number of respondents who had used the Missoula Food Bank (72.7%). Twenty-seven percent of respondents had used no other services but the Missoula Food Bank. Other local programs were used more frequently, primarily those that offer emergency services “with little red tape.” Thirty-one percent of respondents listed the use of other food banks, food pantries, soup kitchens, shelters, and other programs that provide basic necessities.

While large numbers of people depend on local, non-profit programs, those accessing federally funded assistance programs designed to address these same issues are far fewer. For example, only 17.8% of survey respondents were using or had used the Food Stamp Program, while only 17.3% were using or had used the Section 8 Housing Voucher Program administered through the Missoula Housing Authority. More often than not, people used a combination of both governmental programs and local, non-profit programs (33.3%), the latter becoming particularly important at the end of the month. A number of comments described how monthly food stamp allotments were insufficient. Respondents described the end of the month as “a little scary.” Running out of food stamps drives many to food banks, pantries, and feeding programs. One person commented, “We only have food for half the month and then we have no choice but to come to the food bank.” Some cited their household’s dependence on these alternative food resources. For example, one respondent wrote, “I barely can make rent so I depend solely on the food banks to eat.”

“I barely can make rent so I depend solely on the food banks to eat.”

-Service user

Deciding Not to Apply for Services

In an effort to understand why some programs, particularly those that are state or federally funded, are underused, the survey asked respondents if they had ever decided not to apply for services even though they may have been eligible. Fifty-five percent responded in the affirmative. When asked why this was the case, the number one reason reported was,

“Someone else needs it more than I do” (40.3%). Contrary to the myth that people will “abuse the system” if given an opportunity, respondents explained that they seek out assistance only if absolutely necessary. Furthermore, 30% remarked that it is “embarrassing to apply for services.” These responses demonstrate that for many, asking for help is stigmatizing. For example, one respondent wrote, “Since I’m a full-time worker and I’m not homeless, I feel like maybe I don’t deserve it.” Other respondents did not apply for services because the application process was intimidating (27.2%) and because the benefit amount they would receive did not justify going to the trouble of filling out the paperwork (27.2%).

IDENTIFYING BARRIERS TO FOOD SECURITY

Income Eligibility Requirements

One of the most consistent themes noted on the survey was frustration with the federal income guidelines that determine eligibility for some assistance programs. The “one-size-fits-all” guidelines developed at the federal level negatively affect the ability of many Missoula County residents to access services, which in turn, compromises their food security. Fifty-one percent of all survey respondents affirmed that they had been found ineligible for assistance at some point during the last two years. The top reason endorsed was that their income was too high to qualify (62.4%). Although federal income guidelines apply to nearly all governmental assistance programs, 69% of respondents listed the Food Stamp Program as the most difficult to access. One respondent commented, “It doesn’t seem right or make sense how the programs base what you get off your income alone and not on everything else you have to pay for.”

“If you work too much they cut food stamps. If you don’t work enough you can’t afford anything, so what do you do?”

-Service user

Respondents emphasized two particular problems with the federal income guidelines. The first concern highlighted the bind of earning an income too high to qualify for services, but too low to put food on the table consistently. They explained that the guidelines fail to consider essential cost of living expenses such as rent, utilities, and health care needs. In the words of one respondent, “We make too much money but housing, utilities, and food are not considered and we have \$10,000 in medical bills and have to pay for my husband’s heart medications out of pocket.” Many described how because they made more than the required amount, they “ended up being poorer.” Some respondents remarked that barely going over the eligibility limit was a matter of a few dollars, a small amount that makes an enormous difference.

The second concern with federal income guidelines was that they offer no transition period off of assistance. One respondent remarked, “I qualified for food stamps before I got a job. After getting a job with low wages, they said I no longer qualified. They shouldn’t just cut someone off without a little assistance until they can get on their feet again.” Another stated, “If you work too much they cut food stamps. If you don’t work enough you can’t afford anything, so what do you do?” Getting “kicked off of assistance” brought up an important question for some respondents: “If the point of assistance is to assist me back to a place where I am self-reliant and self-determining, doesn’t cutting me off without a transition period defeat the purpose?” Isn’t it, in the words of one service user, “counterproductive to the entire goal?” One respondent wrote, “I just need a little help until I can get on my feet and have a stable income...The more I try to help myself the less I get in benefits. I will never get out of this hole.”

“Too Much Red Tape”

Four hundred and nine respondents found some programs more difficult to use than others. Their number one reason was “too much paperwork” (47.2%). Local non-profit programs which have more discretion in determining their own policies and guidelines are far more likely to have a more simplified application, while state programs are more likely to have lengthy applications. For example, the application for Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) cash assistance, medical assistance, and Food Stamps is eighteen pages long. One respondent commented, “The applications can be very repetitive, too lengthy...the programs ask for the same information.” Respondents stated that the paperwork for many programs is “mind-boggling and overwhelming” and also intrusive insofar as it requires “too much information about your life.”

Requiring too much personal information about people’s lives seems to compromise access to services. One respondent stated, “It seems too hard to deal with all the paperwork, proof of this, that, and the other thing.” As described by survey respondents, the applications, the appointments, the verifications, the certifications, the re-certifications, and the constant running around left many “too exhausted to do another thing.” In the words of one service user, jumping through hoop after hoop is “tedious, humiliating, and oppressive.”

“The applications can be repetitive, too lengthy . . . the programs ask for the same information.”

-Service user

Waiting Lists

The second most important reason people found some programs more difficult to use than others was the “waiting list for assistance/services,” especially for housing. One respondent stated, “Waiting lists and rental assistance is impossible in Missoula, especially in emergency situations.” The average wait time for a housing voucher in Missoula County is two years. One person wrote, “There are obvious housing problems when one is on a two-year waiting list. It’s ridiculous.” With high housing costs being one of the top factors affecting people’s ability to eat well, the availability of both affordable housing and housing assistance is crucial. Waiting, however, does not apply solely to housing: Respondents also mentioned their frustrations waiting for Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), a federal program designed to provide income to people who are unable to work because of a particular physical or mental condition. One person wrote, “My son is awaiting SS disability. Things take too long. He can’t seem to get assistance.” Waiting months for assistance poses an enormous challenge for people who have immediate needs and “need help now.”

CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR FOOD SECURITY

Ensure Considerate and Respectful Treatment

Out of 420 respondents, the number one reason service users found some programs easier to use than others was that they were “treated with consideration and respect” (69.5%), while 63.8% remarked that it was because “staff are helpful.” Respectful treatment by caring staff is without question one of the most important issues for service users. One respondent wrote, “When people treat you with respect or like they want to help it always makes things not so bad.”

Respondents voiced their appreciation of staff that took an interest in their situation and helped guide them through “the daunting maze of applications and requirements.” One service user discussed how important it was to be involved in a program to find a job and to work with staff who, “cared about my unique situation instead of just going through the motions of helping me.” Many respondents described unpleasant experiences with trying to access assistance programs, especially their encounters with service providers they felt treated them disrespectfully. In the words of one service user, “When I mentioned that it was difficult to manage working and children after divorce, the worker remarked that I’d find someone else again soon.” Ensuring easy access to programs requires respectful, well-trained staff. Respondents wanted service providers to recognize that life can change in an instant and that no one wants to feel chastised for seeking out help. One respondent

suggested, “Try treating people like you’d want to be treated, not a lower class. You might someday be in their shoes.”

Reduce Paperwork and Minimize Program Requirements

Respondents found programs easier to use if they had an “easy application process” (47.2% of 420 respondents). One respondent wrote, “It makes people not so overwhelmed to use services when they don’t have to give their life story when they are in need of help.” The two most frequent recommendations respondents made to address this issue were developing one application for multiple programs and a simplified application consisting of less paperwork. Together, these recommendations account for 42% of all proposed changes. Simplifying and streamlining the application process would improve access to services.

Comments across the survey called for income guidelines that met the needs of the working poor and took cost of living expenses into consideration. In the words of one respondent, “I believe there are more people who work but struggle to make ends meet. They need to increase the income level amounts required to be eligible for assistance.” In a service economy dominated by low wage paying jobs and high costs of living, many are struggling but earn too much to access government assistance. Moving from assistance to self-reliance is very difficult without support during the interim. Providing a transition period off of assistance would create opportunities to improve access to programs and to food more generally.

Find More Convenient Locations, Extend Hours, and Conduct More Outreach

Convenient locations and expanded hours for service beyond the traditional 8-to-5 work day are important factors that can minimize barriers to access. Out of 420 respondents, 35.5% reported that programs with convenient locations are easier to use, and 31.5% said programs with convenient hours are easier to use. People working for low wages find it difficult, if not impossible, to take time off from work to complete applications or meet with a case worker. Respondents suggested “one-stop shopping,” where a number of service providers could pool their resources and offer assistance from one location. The availability of weekend appointments would also increase the accessibility of service programs. Another issue that kept people from accessing services was a lack of knowledge about community resources and the absence of an information clearing house to educate potential service users about the services available in the community to assist them with meeting their basic needs.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

This chapter summarizes information gathered from surveys administered to 461 people who use services in Missoula County. Though the survey findings are not representative of the perspectives of all service users, they point to important themes concerning barriers to using services and the factors that can help create opportunities for food security.

Service users cited low wages, high housing costs, and high fuel/heating costs as the top three issues that affect their ability to eat well. Respondents relied on a variety of services to meet basic needs; however, they accessed local, non-profit programs with far more frequency than state-funded assistance programs. Many chose not to apply for services even though they may have been eligible. The number one reason for doing so was that respondents thought someone else might need it more than they did. Many had been found ineligible for services at some point during the last two years because their income was too high to qualify. Respondents pointed to federal income guidelines, too much paperwork, and waiting lists for services as significant barriers to program access, and food security more generally. To dismantle these barriers, respondents recommended reducing paperwork and simplifying application processes. They proposed minimizing program requirements and changing income eligibility guidelines to reflect cost of living increases and to provide a transition period off of assistance. They called for considerate and respectful treatment from service providers. They also suggested extending hours and finding more convenient locations. Many of their concerns and recommendations for change are repeated in Chapter 3, which reports findings from a town hall meeting attended by service users.

CHAPTER 3

People's Voices and Collective Wisdom

INTRODUCTION

This chapter reports on the design, analysis, and major findings of a town hall meeting attended by people who use services to address food, housing, healthcare, utilities, and other basic needs. The purpose of the meeting was to examine how cost of living issues affect people's ability to eat well. More specifically, the meeting aimed to explore what makes some services easy to use and others more difficult to use. Participants were also asked for their recommendations for better addressing cost of living issues in Missoula County.

TOWN HALL MEETING DESIGN AND METHODS

Recruitment Considerations and Criteria

The town hall meeting for service users was held for two hours in October of 2006; however, preliminary meeting planning began in May of 2006. The FSFI cost of living subcommittee decided a town hall meeting would provide an opportunity for people to collectively discuss their experiences with services and the effects rising costs of living have had on their lives. The subcommittee's primary goal was to maximize participation at the meeting and to ensure that participants felt valued for their contributions. Subcommittee members voiced their concerns about whether attendees would feel comfortable speaking in a large group environment. To provide a space where everyone felt comfortable expressing their views, meeting planners decided to begin the meeting with small group discussion (focus groups) and to end with large group discussion.

Participants were recruited via flyers posted at local service programs throughout the county. Individuals interested in attending the meeting were screened by steering committee members based on the following criteria: Participants were required to be at least 18 years old, be a Missoula County resident, and have experience using services in the last two years. Phone calls were made two days in advance to remind everyone about the meeting. All attendees were provided with dinner and a small stipend. Transportation and child care were provided.

Town Hall Meeting Structure and Facilitation

Participants signed a consent form ensuring confidentiality and explaining the meeting's purpose and its structure. Everyone was provided with an agenda, a list of discussion ground rules, and the questions that would be covered during small group discussion. Meeting facilitators made ground rules explicit to foster an environment of respect and comfort, and to encourage attendees to share their perspectives even if they differed from the perspectives of others. The meeting began after dinner. A steering committee member spoke to the large group and shared her experience with food insecurity and explained her reasons for being involved in the FSFI project. Immediately afterwards, focus group discussions started in five small groups each led by a facilitator. All of the facilitator had direct experience with food insecurity with the exception of one.

For one hour facilitators guided their groups through the questions and a scribe at each table recorded people's responses on flip charts. Meeting planners decided not to tape record the discussion because of the potential discomfort this might cause. Although this made capturing every word impossible, it ensured that no one would be intimidated by the presence of a tape recorder. As they were filled, flip chart pages were collected by two steering committee members and taped on the meeting room walls clustered together based on the following questions:

1. Of the services you have used, which are the easiest and most helpful to use and why?
2. Which are the most difficult to use and why?
3. Please describe positive and negative experiences you have had using cost of living services.
4. What are strategies you use to cope with the high cost of living in Missoula County?
5. What changes would you like to see happen in Missoula County to address your concerns with cost of living issues?

In preparation for the large group discussion, after the focus groups ended everyone took a short break and a "walking tour" of the room to read the flip chart responses recorded by all five groups. A steering committee member facilitated the large group discussion and asked participants about particular themes they noticed as they reviewed the flip chart responses and if they thought anything was missing. The project's next steps were explained. All participants completed both a feedback form and a card which asked them if they were interested in getting involved with the FSFI project. They were also asked if they wanted to attend a public forum where the results and recommendations from the project would be presented.

Town Hall Meeting Analysis

All information recorded on the flip charts was typed and distributed to steering committee members for separate review. Members then met as a group and discussed what they thought were the dominant themes and sub-themes apparent in responses to the focus group questions. Themes and sub-themes were compiled and coded and then reviewed again to ensure reliability.¹

About Town Hall Meeting Participants

Twenty-nine people attended the town hall meeting, which included 16 females and 13 males ranging in age from 21 to 86. Before the meeting, everyone completed a brief demographic survey. The majority of the participants were White (72.4%) although 2 people identified as Native American and 5 people as mixed race or ethnicity. Almost half of the participants were over age 65, explaining, at least in part, why almost 76% of participants did not have anyone under the age of 18 living in their households. Approximately 50% had completed some college, while the other 50% had completed high school or a GED. Forty-eight percent of all participants were employed.

Sixty percent of respondents noted that they had cut the size of their meals or skipped meals during the last 12 months because they lacked sufficient funds to purchase food. The services participants had used most frequently within the last year included the Missoula Food Bank, the Food Stamp Program, housing assistance, and the Senior Nutrition Program. Of all services used, food programs were cited with the most frequency.

Almost two-thirds of the participants affirmed that cost of living issues affected their ability to eat well. The most significant issues were high housing costs (72.4%), high health care costs (65.5%) and high heating costs (65.5%). Participants were also asked what strategies they used to cope with these issues. Their responses included “buying cheaper cuts of meat and sale items,” like “three hot dogs for a dollar at Ole’s,” poaching food, selling drugs, donating plasma, and panhandling on the street. One participant reported, “I lived in my car from March to October. I used the Poverello and the Salvation Army (free laundry). I learned to be a street lady – don’t knock it.” Others commented on gardening, canning, and surviving on leftovers. They shared meals with friends and family to cut down on food costs. They sacrificed their health and went without medications and much needed dental work. And they voiced their frustration about trying to survive on less. In the words of one participant, “there is no reason anyone should have to do that.”

¹ As reported in Chapter 2, content analysis was used to analyze all of the town hall, interview, and open-ended survey data for the project.

MAJOR FINDINGS

Praise for Local Services and Programs

Town hall meeting participants overwhelmingly noted that local, non-profit programs were far easier to use than governmental services. The Missoula Food Bank, for example, received many positive responses that included comments about convenient hours, minimal requirements and paperwork, and “nice, respectful, non-prying volunteers.” Faith-based programs that provide food and other basic needs also received high accolades for many of the same reasons. The seniors in attendance at the meeting praised Missoula Aging Services, an organization that provides services to the elderly. They mentioned the availability of coupons for use at the farmers’ market and local restaurants and they commented about the staff “at the front desk that will always help point people in the right direction for additional services.”

Accessing Federal and State Funded Services

Although local, non-profit services were praised by many for their helpfulness and accessibility, federally funded assistance programs were cited as the most difficult to use. For

“You need perfect credit and no debt. It’s a Catch 22 – if you have perfect credit and no debt you don’t need services.”

-Service user

example, housing assistance and the Food Stamp Program were consistently described as difficult to access. The two-year waiting list for housing was cited as the factor that most compromised access to affordable housing. The Food Stamp Program was criticized for meager allotments, especially for single people, and also income guidelines that were overwhelmingly characterized as too low and “unrealistic” with respect to what it takes to survive in Missoula County. One participant had this to say about program requirements in general: “You need perfect credit and no debt. It’s a Catch 22 – if you have perfect credit and no debt you don’t need services.” Similarly, government healthcare services and energy

assistance were reported to have “inflexible” guidelines that failed to consider individual circumstances. They were also reported to have burdensome requirements, such as a “year-long back check” of all sources of household income in order to receive assistance. One participant remarked that for Medicaid, “you need proof of what you don’t have to qualify.”

Comments also addressed the frustration felt by many with caseworker turnover and the lack of “live relationships and people.” Participants shared stories of failed attempts to contact caseworkers and program staff, and they voiced considerable frustration with voicemail and automated phone systems that left them feeling disconnected from “real people” who might take an active and immediate interest in their situation.

Paperwork, Guidelines, and “Being Cut Off of Services”

Participants made numerous comments about how paperwork and income guidelines compromise access to assistance. With respect to paperwork, one participant said that, “Paperwork makes everything difficult. It’s hard to keep all that documentation and it’s too complicated.” More than paperwork, however, eligibility guidelines were by far the most pressing concerns voiced by town hall meeting participants. The struggle to prove that one lacks resources was mentioned numerous times. One participant stated “You’re denied help because you can’t prove you don’t have resources.” Another explained, “Because I had a home and a car, I was denied all services even though I was in a rough spot.”

Furthermore, participants explained how federal income guidelines structure program eligibility in such a way that programs do not provide a gradual transition out of poverty. One person described how you “can’t move forward (increases in income) without getting benefits cut.” When people make slightly more than the income guidelines will allow, rarely are they suddenly self-reliant; one participant said it was “still not enough to survive.” Another talked about being terminated from the Food Stamp Program because she received additional funds to pay her rent. She understood the precariousness of her position: “If you put one step forward, it may bump you four steps back.”

“Paperwork makes everything difficult. It’s hard to keep all that documentation and it’s too complicated.”
-Service user

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHANGE

Make Housing Affordable and Raise Wages

The most frequently occurring recommendation made by town hall meeting participants for how to address cost of living issues that compromised their ability to eat well focused on housing affordability. Suggestions for dealing with high housing costs ranged from putting “a cap on rental cost,” to shortening the waiting list for housing vouchers; from offering a sliding income scale for housing assistance, to forming a renters’ union. Additionally, many called for addressing Missoula County’s low wages, and the low wages in Montana as a whole. One participant remarked, “Wages are above poverty, but not enough to make ends meet.” Another explained, “I have a good job but it’s still paycheck to paycheck.” Making housing more affordable and raising wages were viewed as essential first steps towards building a food secure Missoula County.

Change Program Policies to Improve Access

Town hall meeting participants called for a number of programmatic policy changes to improve access to services. Perhaps most important, they wanted to see more administrative discretion at the local level for determining program policies and procedures. One participant called for “a law that gives agencies the right to make rules and regulations.” Participants noted that services are too scattered and independent of one another. They recommended centralizing services to foster greater efficiency. They suggested creating a centralized database for all potential applicants and basing income guidelines on net income instead of gross income. They also proposed having the same guidelines and requirements for multiple programs.

Creating Participatory Decision Making Processes

Town hall meeting attendees also called for greater participation in decision making processes that affect program policies and regulations. One person proposed “creating committees to listen to what we’re saying.” Another echoed this idea by saying, “The heads of services, county commissioners, and politicians should come to meet with people who need the services.” Service users remarked how they felt voiceless with respect to many policies that have a tremendous influence on their lives. Seeking to have more of an impact on public policy, one participant recommended having “more town meetings with common people.”

“The heads of services, county commissioners, and politicians should come to meet with people who need services.”
-Service user

Communities around the world are increasingly recognizing that creating sustainable policy requires the participation of people who will ultimately be affected by policy.² With respect to food access in Missoula County, creating an environment where the concerns of service users are front and center in policy making processes is crucial. Not only would such a process inform the development of more sustainable policy, it would also provide a space where people can share their experiences, learn from one another, and collectively arrive at solutions for long-term change.³ It would establish a forum for dialogue where people can work together to make Missoula County a place where everyone has access to food.

² See Beresford, P. & Hoban, M. (2005). *Participation in anti-poverty and regeneration work and research: Overcoming barriers and creating opportunities*. York, UK: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

³ See Shulman, L. (2006). *The skills of helping individuals, families, groups, and communities* (5th ed.). Belmont, CA: Thomson Brooks/Cole.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

This chapter is a synthesis of the information gathered at a town hall meeting held for people who have experience using services to address cost of living issues. Although the information provided by the 29 participants is not representative of the opinions, beliefs, and experiences of all local service users, its worth lies in how well the issues raised are congruent with information gathered through other methods in the study.

Sixty percent of all participants had cut the size of meals or skipped meals during the last twelve months and their most pressing concerns with respect to cost of living were high housing, healthcare, and utility costs. They coped with these issues in a variety of ways, and all had experience with the resources available for people with limited income in Missoula County. Overwhelmingly, they endorsed many local, non-profit services for their ease of access, largely because of their easy applications, minimal requirements, and attentive, respectful staff. Participants described how paperwork, waiting lists, benefit amounts, poor treatment, and income guidelines that fail to address individual circumstances were aspects of many government funded programs that made them difficult to access. They recommended addressing the structural causes of food insecurity, calling for more affordable housing and a living wage. They suggested changes in program policies that would give organizations more discretion to determine their own procedures and guidelines. They discussed creating a centralized database for all services. Their recommendations for change fell against the backdrop of a more general call to be more involved in the decision making processes that affect them. They suggested creating opportunities for participatory decision making where their voices would be valued and included.

LINKING SURVEY AND TOWN HALL MEETING FINDINGS

Using two different methods to investigate the barriers to and opportunities for food security helps to substantiate what service users see as important issues. Table 3.1 provides a comparison across the two methods used to collect information from service users.⁴ Numerous significant themes emerged when the survey data is compared with the information gathered at the town hall meeting. The most prominent theme is the ease of accessing many local, non-profit organizations compared to the difficulties of accessing federally funded programs. Local nonprofits have little to no paperwork, few eligibility requirements, and attentive staff. Interacting with compassionate service providers who take

⁴ For ease of understanding, we constructed a framework for Table 3.1 that groups barriers and opportunities according to the level at which they occur although we are aware there is overlap with some issues between categories. For example, while we attribute “no transition off of services” to an organizational barrier, this particular issue is tied to funding regulations that may be outside of an organization’s control. Nonetheless, the benefit of the framework is that it provides a way to visually represent information and it suggests some ideas about the level at which creating change might occur.

an interest in people's personal needs and circumstances was repeatedly noted as a significant factor that makes some programs easier to use than others.

Barriers to and Opportunities for Food Security	Surveys	Town Hall Meeting
Individual Barriers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ lack of knowledge/misinformation re: services ▪ overstressed/too many obligations 	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
Organizational Barriers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ lengthy applications ▪ lengthy waiting lists for services ▪ too impersonal – voice mail, automated phones ▪ inconsiderate treatment ▪ no transition period off of services 	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
Community and Structural Barriers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ low wages ▪ high cost of housing ▪ high fuel/heating costs ▪ high health care costs ▪ inflexible federal income guidelines ▪ inadequate benefit amounts 	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
Organizational Level Opportunities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ extend hours/create more convenient locations ▪ reduce requirements/paperwork/rules ▪ ensure welcoming, respectful treatment ▪ view relationships as a top priority ▪ allow more discretion for special circumstances ▪ create transition period off of services 	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
Community and Structural Level Opportunities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ make housing affordable ▪ raise wages ▪ create policy allowing more agency discretion ▪ develop centralized database for applicants ▪ lower income eligibility guidelines ▪ create same guidelines for multiple programs ▪ initiate forum for participatory decision making ▪ meet needs for assistance from one location ▪ distribute information on service availability & eligibility 	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>

Table 3.1: Service User Identified Barriers and Opportunities for Food Security

Across both methods, service users agree that there are more barriers to accessing state and federally funded services. Paperwork, waiting lists, income eligibility guidelines, and the lack

of a transition period were noted as significant barriers for both town hall meeting participants and survey respondents. Both pointed to the excessive paperwork that demands information most people do not keep readily available and the difficulty of being on a waiting list when one needs services immediately. They discussed how income eligibility guidelines fail to consider the rising cost of living in Missoula County and prevent many who need services from being able to access them. Furthermore, they remarked that “one-size-fits-all” guidelines prevent programs from creating ways to transition people out of poverty. Both survey respondents and town hall meeting participants want income eligibility guidelines that meet the needs of the working poor and a transition period that helps people move successfully out of poverty. They cited Missoula County’s low wages and high housing costs as the most significant issues that influence their ability to feed themselves and their families. In sum, survey respondents and town hall meeting participants shared many of the same concerns and they offered similar recommendations to affect change.

PART II

Cost of Living and Food Access from a Service Provider Perspective

OVERVIEW

Part II of *Food Insecurity in Missoula County* explores issues related to cost of living and food access from a service provider perspective. This section presents the findings from three different approaches used to explore the barriers to and opportunities for food security in Missoula County. Each approach sheds light on different aspects of barriers and opportunities from the perspective of people who administer services and work directly with community residents faced with tough choices about whether to buy food or pay this month's rent.

In gathering information about service providers' perspectives of food insecurity we wanted to understand what administrators and executive directors of service programs thought about caseload increases, the processes potential service recipients go through to become eligible for services, what attracts people to their organizations, and what makes them successful at what they do. We also wanted to draw on their experiences to better understand funding and funding constraints, legislative policy change and its impact on their organizations, and the changes they would make in their organizations and in the community to address food insecurity in Missoula County. In an effort to understand how different organizational structures influence approaches to providing services, we interviewed administrators from governmental, nonprofit, and faith-based programs. One of our objectives was to understand why service users preferred using some programs over others. Chapter 4 presents a summary of findings concerning these issues from our conversations with program administrators.

To compliment the information we were gathering from administrators, we developed a survey that would help us explore the experiences of service program employees, people whose job it is to meet face to face with people who request services, determine their eligibility, and act as intermediaries between service programs and people who need them. We wanted to understand from their perspective what policies and program procedures made it easier for people to access services and likewise, what changes they would implement to address the barriers that compromise people's ability to receive assistance.

Furthermore, we wanted to know what discretion service program employees had in determining eligibility for services and if they had leeway to consider special circumstances in their decision making. Similar to the administrator interviews, we wanted to know if there might be differences among service providers based on whether they were employed by a governmental agency, a nonprofit, or a faith-based organization. Chapter 5 presents the findings from the Service Provider Survey designed by FSFI steering committee members.

Initially when the FSFI steering committee first began discussing who to talk to, what methods to use, and questions to guide our work, we hoped to create a forum where service users and service providers could meet together. We wanted to facilitate a process where two groups (service users and service providers) could pool their experiences to arrive at alternative approaches to address barriers to services and to learn from one another about the factors that promoted opportunities for increased food security. After reading about failed attempts at bringing people together whose relationships have been structured by *power over* instead of *power with*,¹ the steering committee decided to conduct separate town hall meetings, one for service users and one for service providers. Our intention was to bring both groups together for another town hall meeting at a later date to present back to them, in a compiled and organized fashion, the information they had so willingly given to us.² Hopefully, as the FSFI Project moves into its action phase, hosting another town hall meeting will be high on the priority list. Chapter 6 reports on the findings from the second town hall meeting attended by program administrators, city government officials, and service program employees. The town hall meeting provided the opportunity for a small group of people to learn about their services, to share with one another what aspects of their organizations they felt made a difference in addressing cost of living issues in Missoula County and those that created obstacles, and to brainstorm ideas for change.

¹ See Townsend, J., Zapata, E., Rowlands, J., Alberti, P., Mercado, M. (1999). *Women and power: Fighting patriarchies and poverty* (pp. 19-45). London: Zed Books. Townsend and her colleagues, drawing from their work with rural Mexican women, discuss four dimensions of power: (1) power over, (2) power from within, (3) power with, and (4) power to do. Power over they describe as institutionalized forms of oppression.

² See McCullum, C., Pelletier, D., Barr, D., Wilkins, J., & Habicht, J. (2004). Mechanisms of power within a community-based food security planning process. *Health Education & Behavior*, 31(2), 206-222. McCullum and co-authors describe a food security planning meeting attended by program administrators, city and county government officials, and a number of people who had firsthand experience of food insecurity. In the final analysis, people who had used services felt overpowered at the meeting, their voices unheard.

CHAPTER 4

Individual Interviews with Service Program Administrators

INTRODUCTION

This chapter reports on the methods, analysis, and findings from individual interviews with administrators and executive directors of Missoula-based organizations that offer services to address housing, food, utilities, health care, and other basic needs. Interviews were designed to fulfill a two-fold purpose: (1) to obtain more in-depth, rich information from participants than possible through town hall meetings or surveys regarding their perspectives about organizational procedures, funding issues, programmatic strengths, and changes they would make to improve access to food for people with limited income in Missoula County and; (2) to provide a broader context from which to understand public assistance services locally, the concerns of the people who use them, and how organizations are affected by funding decisions and guidelines created at state and federal levels.

WHO WE INTERVIEWED AND THE METHODS WE USED

Interviewees

Twelve administrators from governmental, nonprofit, and faith-based organizations that provide services to people with limited income in Missoula County were interviewed between July and December of 2006 (see Figure 4.1).

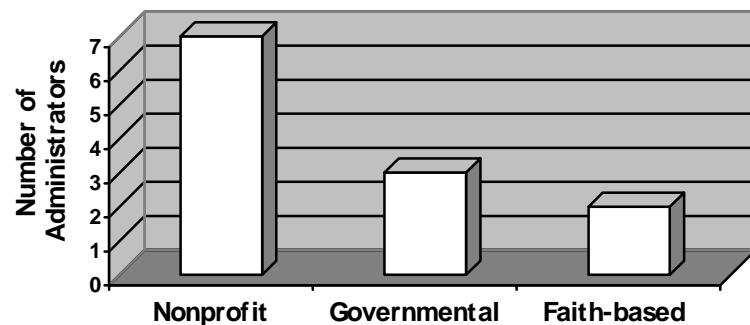


Figure 4.1: Administrators and Organization Type

Purposive sampling was used to select interview participants. This sampling method is used when there is a specific, predefined group that has particular information of importance to

the research.¹ Steering committee members generated a list of organizations that provide services to address basic needs in Missoula County as potential interview sites. Telephone contacts were made to solicit participation from administrators. Twelve responded and agreed to be interviewed. Each participant was informed of the project's objectives and the nature and purpose of the interview.

Years employed at their organizations ranged from 2 to 22 years. The average number of years in their current positions was 7. The sample contained a large number of "seasoned" administrators. They had weathered a number of years in their positions and therefore had experienced many of the ebbs and flows of administering human service programs. The

It's really intense work and not easy. There's a lot of pressure.
-Program Administrator

number of staff they were responsible for ranged from one part-time position to 39 full-time employees. Approximately half of the organizations used volunteers and student interns to assist with program operations. They conducted intake interviews, distributed food, and assessed eligibility for services. The number of people the organizations served annually varied according to the services offered. Specific programs within organizations provided services to differing numbers of recipients. All interviewees were asked about staff turnover in their organizations. Responses varied from "none" to "very high." Forty-one percent of the sample reported a steady to high turnover rate of employees. One administrator provided the following explanation: "It's really intense work and not easy. There's a lot of pressure." In a similar vein, another administrator remarked, "Our turnover is high...as much as 40%. It's a hard, intense load. The government pay is not as high as private pay and there's a perception of instability because of the grant funding."

METHODS

FSFI steering committee members conducted the individual interviews in teams of two. This provided an opportunity for "member checking" following the interview. Member checking is one method to ensure reliability of information by cross-checking the information's accuracy with someone else's observations.² Interviews were conducted at participants' place of employment. They ranged in length from 45 minutes to 1.5 hours. Notes were taken during interviews and all were tape recorded and transcribed afterwards. Administrators were asked questions concerning the following topics:

¹ See Dudley, James, R. (2005). *Research methods for social work: Becoming consumers and producers of research*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon, for more in-depth information on sampling methods.

² Neuman, W.L., & Kreuger, L. (2003). *Social work research methods: Qualitative and quantitative applications* (p. 381). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon..

- The application process, including eligibility requirements and the latitude staff has to make exceptions to the rules;
- The nature of their organizations – what makes them successful, and what attracts people to them;
- How organizational policies and procedures affect food access for people with limited income;
- Whether the need for services has increased in the last few years;
- How services are affected by cost of living increases (e.g., gas prices, utility costs, housing, and health care);
- How their organizations help to address food security issues locally, and;
- The changes they would make to their programs or new services they would create to improve access to food in Missoula County.³

Content analysis,⁴ as described previously, was used to code interview data, generate relevant themes across interviews, and assess their importance. Steering committee members individually reviewed all of the interview transcripts and then met as a group to arrive at major themes and sub-themes. Quotations extracted directly from interviews are used verbatim in this report to help illustrate important themes. The information gathered during interviews does not necessarily represent the views and perspectives of all service program administrators or executive directors in Missoula County, nor is it intended to do so. It does, however, provide an important point of comparison with survey results and a snapshot of the perceptions of an experienced group of Missoula County program administrators.

A CONTEXT FOR UNDERSTANDING SERVICES AND ASSISTANCE

Requirements, Constraints, and Discretion

Organizations are complex systems. They are affected by both vertical and horizontal influences.⁵ Vertical influences are factors such as funding or legislative rulings that affect the organization from outside the community. Horizontal influences are those that affect the organization from within the community such as locale-specific cost of living issues, county politics, and population increases. To more fully grasp the organizational context from which service programs operate, it is necessary to understand organizational structure and programmatic policies and procedures. These can constrain program operations or provide liberating influences that allow a “free hand” or discretion in how business is conducted.

³ An interview protocol containing procedural information about conducting interviews as well as the questions asked of interviewees is available from the authors upon request.

⁴ Berg, Bruce. (2004). *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences* (5th ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

⁵ Warren, R. (1978). *The community in America* (3rd ed.). Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Co.

“Most of the regulations are established by the time the program reaches us. We can’t change the application process or participation terms and income levels and rules.”

-Program administrator

local needs and conditions, had few restrictions. One administrator of a faith-based organization that provided emergency assistance commented, “If people come here and they are in need, we have no income restrictions or guidelines. We know they wouldn’t be coming around asking for food if they didn’t need it.”

Likewise, the application process a potential service recipient goes through to apply for assistance varies according to organizational type and funding source. Programs and services that operated on state and federal funds were more likely to require an extensive application process to assess eligibility. As discussed in Chapter 2, the application for Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) cash assistance, medical assistance, and Food Stamps is eighteen pages long and it requires reporting information most people do not keep track of. On the other hand, nonprofits and faith-based organizations had fewer, if any, eligibility requirements. A nonprofit administrator explained the process, “To eat lunch, people just have to come in the door and sign in. There is no verification of income or anything.” Numerous studies conducted over the past five years have indicated, for example, that the length of the food stamp application has a negative effect on people’s willingness to participate in the program.⁶ Many states have shortened their application. Furthermore, state and federally funded programs have also come to recognize the wisdom in providing more options so that people in need can more easily access services. For example, several

⁶ For example, see Bhattacharai, G., Duffy, P., & Raymond, J. (2005). Use of food pantries and food stamps in low-income households in the United States. *The Journal of Consumer Affairs*, 39(2), 276-298.

programs have initiated processes whereby application information can be gathered over the telephone in lieu of the long-standing requirement for face-to-face contact. Others have begun to consider how to offer same-day services to address emergency situations.

Increasing Need and Decreasing Funding

Changes in the political, social, and economic environment always signal a need for change within an organization. Such has been the case in Missoula County as housing costs continue to rise and in comparison, wages lag behind. Interviews with program administrators indicated that all are witnessing an increase in the need for services in Missoula County. One administrator commented that they have noted an annual increase of 7% to 10% as a rule of thumb over the last five years. However, this past year a 20% increase has been noted. Another administrator remarked on the growing waiting list for housing since 2002, which has increased from 525 to double that amount in 2006. And yet another administrator remarked, “We experience 1000 intakes and 150 emergency food stamp applications a month. We’ve seen a 15% to 20% increase in applications.”

Administrators agree that these changes can be attributed to low wages and the high cost of living in Missoula County: “I think affordable housing and wages are the biggest influence in why we’re seeing more and more homeless families with children.” Although there has previously been a seasonal, cyclical nature to the need for services, administrators are “not seeing the usual summer dip. It used to last two to five months. There’s no dip anymore.” One administrator shared the following perspective: “The middle class in Missoula is getting smaller. The myth is that people can work their way out of poverty. That’s no longer true. Most of our clients are elderly, disabled, or single moms.” In addition, a burgeoning group of people in need of services is being referred to as “the working poor.” These are generally two-parent households where both parents work, some holding two or more jobs⁷ but they do not earn enough to meet their basic needs. All of these groups combined are faced with tough choices about whether to spend their limited salaries on housing, health care needs, or food. As noted in the survey results presented in Chapter 2, many choose to scrimp on food so they can keep a roof over their heads and they sacrifice their own needs so their children can eat.

“We experience 1000 intakes and 150 emergency food applications a month. We’ve seen a 15% to 20% increase in applications.”

-Program administrator

⁷ Nine percent of Montana workers hold two or more jobs according to the U.S. Census Report (2005).

“With the current Bush administration we’ve seen a complete renunciation regarding the federal government’s obligation to folks. We may be operating next year on 53% of the budget we had last year. . .”

-Program administrator

The general consensus among administrators was that the escalating cost of living in Missoula County has increased the need for all human service programs at the same time that many social programs are experiencing funding cuts. One administrator remarked, “With the current Bush administration we’ve seen a complete renunciation regarding the federal government’s obligation to folks. We may be operating next year on 53% of the budget we had last year. . . The supply of public housing units in Missoula County should not be dependent on what happens in Washington, D.C.” Several interviewees pointed out what they called “the ripple effect,” or changes that occur at the state and federal levels that trickle down and affect the day-to-day operations of community human service organizations. One administrator commented that the best barometer of increased demand for services is the food banks. Emergency food programs are generally easier to access and have fewer eligibility requirements. People are more likely to rely on these services in times of need. Another administrator reported, “Our costs go up and funding is being cut. We have to either reduce services or increase co-pays. We haven’t been allowed to expand any services for almost 3 years now.”

Given these conditions an important question is, “How are administrators coping with and addressing the increased need for services and the co-occurring decreases in funding?” Some are writing more grants and diversifying the sources from which they seek funding. Some are trying to increase their efficiency and productivity and make the best use of their existing resources. Some are increasing their pool of volunteers. Others are thinking about advocacy and the need to focus on the underlying causes of food insecurity by helping to raise the minimum wage and by supporting other initiatives to address the rising cost of living in Missoula County.

CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR FOOD SECURITY

What people, organizations, and communities can do to create opportunities for food security can be thought of on a number of important levels, from individual acts of kindness, to shifting organizational procedures, or making policy change at governmental levels. What, for example, gets people to walk through the doorways of some programs and ask for assistance while they steer clear of others? What attracts people to particular organizations and what makes them special? What lies at the heart of an organization’s success? While

these questions do not ask directly how to create opportunities for food security, they do provide some answers about what gets people in the door. These questions are especially important when we consider, as noted in the Introduction, that there are far more people who are actually eligible for services than who actually use them. Why are some programs underused while others are overused?

Touching People in the Long Term

All interviewees commented that the primary value of their organizations lie in the fact that they function to identify fundamental community needs such as housing, health care, and food for families and school lunches for children, and they address them. A number of interviewees explained the importance of meeting more than short-term subsistence goals and reaching beyond giving charity “to touching people in the long term.” Administrators of services that require little paperwork, that are linked to community funding sources with minimal restrictions from state and federal funding requirements were more likely to discuss the need to develop relationships with service users. One administrator explained, “I just think that sometimes we’re a low key place to walk into compared to a place with a big desk and a sign-in sheet. We provide human contact.” Others emphasized that instead of seeing people as “bundles of need” to attend to, their organizations saw people as “relationships to nurture.” Urban environments often lack sufficient support networks and services, and programs can take the place of these networks and help to build new ones. As funding for social programs becomes less of a priority for the federal government, communities are having to assume more responsibility. Another important theme that resonated for administrators of nonfood programs was how providing services and assistance in other areas of basic need frees up people’s finances to purchase food.

“I just think that sometimes we’re a low key place to walk into compared to a place with a big desk and a sign-in sheet . . . We provide human contact.”

-Program administrator

Providing More than Services

Several administrators of nonprofit and faith-based programs expressed the idea that “people can get more than services. . . There’s phones, newspapers, restrooms, hygiene items. . . There’s a lot of fellowship and caring. We don’t run it as a business.” One administrator described giving sleeping bags to a woman living in a tent with her two young children on the Kim Williams trail: “I don’t like to see any little kids that are living like that. The mom asked for a prayer to get a job. She’s been looking for work and she was confident a job would come. She had a voucher for Section 8 housing but was actually holding out on

it till she found work. She didn't want to get the place and work out of town. In other words, she didn't want to waste her voucher until she had a job but she just wanted to get those kids out of there. It's sad."

Other interviewees stressed the importance of "customer satisfaction," "having an accommodating staff," and "wanting people to be comfortable." Almost without exception, administrators noted that the treatment people receive from the staff and volunteers is what helps an organization fulfill its mission. Beyond the basic services administered, they talked about giving people hope and honoring the fact that people often do not have a choice about using services. One administrator eloquently remarked, "We talk about cost of living, lack of good-paying jobs, alcoholism, single parenthood and I guess the root cause of many of these things is people have tragedies in life that happen to them and they don't recover from them. They lose hope and they end up in places they don't want to be. Our vision is to give them a little bit of hope. That's totally our vision."

Organizational Collaboration

Community service programs that work together and minimize "turf issues" function to the betterment of the people the programs are meant to serve. Collaboration can help to expedite access to basic needs, connect people to vital resources, and help to create new ones. Collaboration can also help to fill the gaps in the community's network of social services. For example, one administrator explained, "We really service some of the neediest people that may not walk into a church or somewhere else for help... We fill the cracks." A number of organization leaders emphasized the importance of collaboration and coordinating human services and the ease at which this occurs in Missoula County: "We teach each other all the time."

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CREATING CHANGE

Conduct Public Education to Challenge Inaccurate Assumptions about Service Users

Interviewees were asked what changes they would make to their programs or services to address food insecurity in Missoula County. They discussed decreasing the gap between who is eligible for services and who is actually accessing them. For example, one administrator pointed out the following, "The myth in our society is that we have this huge group of people that are ready to grab all our tax dollars. Most programs only serve 20% to 30% of the eligible population." On the same note, another administrator discussed the importance of bringing this issue to public attention. Federally funded programs that provide food for women and their infants (WIC – Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children) and school lunches for children (NSLP – National School Lunch

Program) are typically underused. Administrators suggested that initiating a community media campaign to inform the public and alert people about program eligibility would help increase access to food, especially for infants and children. A mobile van for conducting outreach to neighborhoods and rural areas was recommended to address this issue.

One administrator painted a vivid picture of people who need services, one that challenges most people's impressions: "Eighty percent of the people we serve have jobs. That's the biggest surprise. The working poor, folks that for whatever reason had an emergency like a health issue or an accident – we serve as their safety net. They never let anyone see them come or go. . .Usually within 10 to 14 days they're back on their feet. When I took this job I thought I would be advocating for people who live on the street, but that's really not the case. I can continue to tell people this but it's just going to take time for people to really believe it's true."

Expedite Application Processes and Eliminate Too Many Rules

Another reoccurring theme addressed by administrators concerned decreasing barriers to food access by eliminating some of the program rules that prevent people from readily taking advantages of available resources. Interviewees discussed the eligibility rules and application processes potential recipients needed to comply with to prove the inadequacy of their resources. In regard to food stamps, one administrator explained, "They should be available to all who want them. I don't believe people would abuse them. Maybe 2% abuse the system. It's too much trouble to work the system. This is not trips to Hawaii or even paper products. This is food!" A related theme addressed the importance of providing parents of children who are eligible for services with services themselves: "They need to be well fed in order to take care of their children."

"Maybe 2% abuse the system. It's too much trouble to work the system. This is not trips to Hawaii or even paper products. This is food."

-Program administrator

Address Structural Issues that Create Food Insecurity

Adjusting and/or eliminating some program rules and regulations is one way to increase access to food by making it easier for people to get. Another approach is to address the socioeconomic issues that keep people stuck in poverty. All administrators interviewed brought up concerns about low wage paying jobs, human rights issues, and the high cost of living in Missoula County. They emphasized the need to engage in more advocacy work to address broader issues that get at the root causes of food insecurity. One administrator stressed the importance of recognizing how lack of power creates situations for people who

are vulnerable because of age, gender, or race or all of these factors combined: “People might stay in abusive situations because they can’t afford to leave. Landlords have control of rents. There are a lot of great landlords out there but there are a lot of predators too. Native Americans and single mothers as well as other people of color are experiencing inappropriate behavior from landlords and there’s not a lot these people feel they can do. Live with it or move. Choices for folks get really narrow.”

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

This chapter summarizes information gathered from interviews with 12 Missoula County program administrators of organizations that provide housing, utility assistance, medical care, food, and short-term shelter. The information presented is not representative of the beliefs, opinions, and experiences of all administrators of human service programs in the county but it does present a snapshot to illuminate important issues represented in other sections of this report.

Depending upon organizational type and funding source, service programs varied in regards to application processes and guidelines. Extensive application processes were more likely requirements of state and federally funded programs, while more informal, locally-based, non-profit programs had a greater degree of discretion in terms of eligibility requirements and programmatic policies and procedures. Without exception all program administrators noted an increasing need for services co-occurring with funding cuts. They attributed the increased need for services to low wages and the high cost of living in Missoula County.

Administrators commented on the importance of providing human contact and hope, and building relationships with service users as an essential precursor to creating more opportunities for food security. Organizational collaboration was viewed as a survival mechanism for all community-based organizations faced with fiscal constraints and the ever increasing burden placed on the community to address problems whose origins may not necessarily stem from local issues. Administrators recommended conducting a public education campaign to challenge inaccurate assumptions of service users that view them “as greedy individuals who will abuse the system if given the chance.” They also agreed that application processes needed to be shortened and policies needed to be revisited to assess barriers to services posed by internal organizational procedures. Finally, all administrators interviewed recommended the need to begin addressing the root causes of food insecurity, namely cost of living issues that compromise people’s ability to eat healthy, nutritious foods and provide for their own shelter.

CHAPTER FIVE

Providing Services and Assistance

INTRODUCTION

This chapter reports on the design, methods, and major findings of the Service Provider Survey. Throughout June of 2007, surveys were administered to 86 service providers at 13 organizations in Missoula County serving residents with limited income. The survey was designed to gather information on the following: perceived changes in requests for services; types of services provided by different organizations; concerns about the effects of the high cost of living on people who use services; eligibility requirements for services; and, recommendations for improving access to services. Learning about the perspectives of service providers is crucial in efforts to improve food access for all Missoula County residents. Service providers are important links between people who need assistance and the programs that seek to help them.

SERVICE USER SURVEY DESIGN AND ANALYSIS

Data Collection and Analysis

The Service Provider Survey was designed by the FSFI Steering Committee. In addition to a careful review of surveys used in other communities in the United States to gather information about food access, steering committee members' first-hand experiences of food insecurity directly informed the items included on the survey. Their experiences with service programs were crucial in determining important items to include and how to word them. The survey contained both open- and closed-ended items. Before administering the survey, it was piloted on a small group of people who conduct intake interviews at a food assistance program. Changes were made based on the feedback received.

In May of 2007, letters were sent to program administrators and/or service providers at 15 organizations asking for their help with the administration of the survey. Service providers at the following organizations agreed to participate: Missoula County Office of Public Assistance, Missoula City-County Health Department (WIC program), Partnership Health Center, Poverello Center, Missoula Food Bank, Missoula Aging Services, Missoula Housing Authority, Missoula Indian Center, Salvation Army, Blue Mountain Clinic, Missoula 3:16, Missoula AIDS Council, and the YWCA of Missoula.

Surveys were distributed with a cover letter that explained its purpose and procedures for ensuring confidentiality. Participation was voluntary. To protect confidentiality, a self-addressed stamped envelope was attached to the back of each survey so respondents could complete and return the survey on their own time. Survey administration was completed in early July of 2007. In total, 86 surveys were returned and analyzed for the results described in this chapter.

Closed-ended items were analyzed using statistical software, and frequencies and percentages were performed on these items. The open-ended items, more than half of which were included to give respondents an opportunity to elaborate on the closed-ended items, were analyzed using content analysis, which has been described in previous sections of the report.

About Survey Respondents and Their Organizations

Eighty-four percent of survey respondents were female and 16% were male. The median number of years respondents had been employed at their organizations was 2.5 years, which is not unusual for human service organizations. High rates of employee turnover can generally be attributed to the stressful nature of the work as explained by program administrators in the previous chapter. Sixty-two percent of respondents classified their organization as a non-profit, while 28% classified their organization as governmental. Figure 5.1 illustrates the types of organizations where service providers were employed.

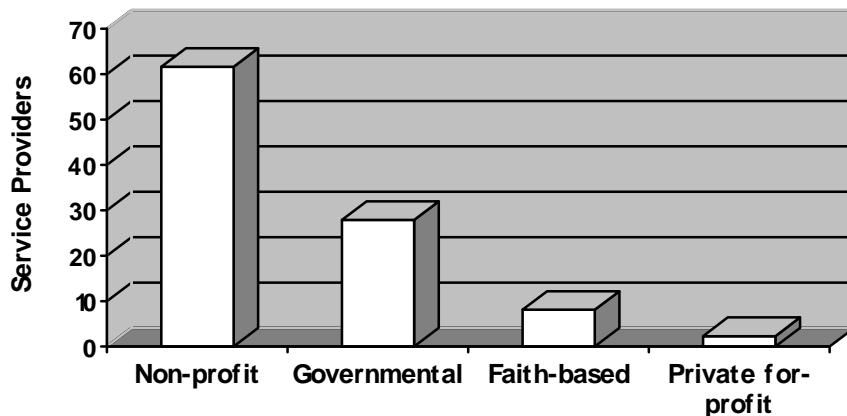


Figure 5.1: Service Providers by Organization Type

Service providers were asked about the services their organizations offer to address cost of living issues for people with limited income. These included assistance to meet medical, housing, food, and other basic needs. Service providers help guide people through what many describe as a fairly complex system. They make referrals, provide information about available services and eligibility requirements, and help people complete applications.

The survey asked whether or not service providers had experienced being on services themselves. Approximately half of the respondents (47.7%) reported having experience with the social service system, either directly or indirectly through the involvement of family members. Comments indicated that service providers understood the importance of lending assistance in times of need, but they were also aware of particular problems that make them difficult to use. One respondent remarked, “I was met with some wisdom and compassion though the system itself has lots of judgments and paternalism built in. Plus, it doesn’t support moving out of poverty very well.” Several comments convey service providers’ sentiments that asking for help can make people feel degraded and ashamed. One respondent recalled, “I felt like everyone was looking down on me.” Another reported, “I have been to the food bank twice a few years back. I felt like people looked at me weird because I was so young and should have been working. However, I was working but \$6.00 an hour didn’t cover rent, medicines, and gas to get to work. So, food was definitely low on my pole of things to buy.” Not only were some service providers familiar with the stigma associated with using services, they were also keenly aware of the fact that federal income guidelines fail to adequately account for rising cost of living expenses in Missoula County. One respondent remarked, “We are the ‘crack people.’ We make too much money to qualify for help but not enough at 55% AMI to make ends meet.”¹

“We are the ‘crack people.’ We make too much money to qualify for help but not enough at 55% AMI to make ends meet.”

-Service provider

FINDINGS FROM THE SERVICE PROVIDER SURVEY

Top Three Cost of Living Issues

The survey asked service providers to list the top three cost of living issues they thought affected service users most. In order of importance, respondents listed housing, health/medical, and food as the most pressing concerns. These responses point to a difference in how service users and service providers responded to this item (see Chapter 2). In other words, there were few references to low wages and lack of employment in responses on the Service Provider Survey, while these issues were service users’ foremost concerns.

Changes in Requests for Services

¹ AMI refers to Area Median Income, which for Missoula County is \$37,172 (US Census, 2004).

Almost three-fourths of respondents (74.4%) noted an increase in requests for services in the past two years, while only 3.5% noted a decrease. As Table 5.1 indicates, 25.6% of respondents reported a large increase, 40.7% reported a moderate increase, and 8.1% reported a small increase. Only 10.5% noted no change in request for services, while approximately 10% indicated that they had not been employed long enough to formulate a basis for judgment. One respondent wrote, “I think more of the working poor are accessing our services.”

Change in Request for Services	Frequency	Percentage
Large increase	22	25.6
Moderate increase	35	40.7
Small increase	7	8.1
No change	9	10.5
Small decrease	1	1.2
Large decrease	2	2.3
Varies monthly	2	2.3
No basis for judgment ²	8	9.3

Table 5.1: Service Providers’ Perceptions of Change in Request for Services in the Past 2 Years

Written comments from service providers further explain their responses to this item by elaborating on cost of living issues that affect their clients. Respondents remarked that there appears to be more people “barely scraping by” who “do not qualify for help with food stamps, LIEAP, etc.”³ Some respondents had either not been employed at their organizations long enough to judge or were uncertain, but many service providers recognize that as the cost of living increases, Missoula County’s working poor will continue to bear a heavy burden as they attempt to pay for all their expenses without the benefit of decent wages.

Flexibility, Discretion, and Guidelines

Approximately 70% of survey respondents reported being able to give special consideration to applicants based on differing circumstances. However, further comments paint a picture

² Some service providers had not been employed long enough at their organization to form a basis for judging whether there had been increases or decreases in requests for services over the past 2 years.

³ LIEAP refers to the Low-Income Energy Assistance Program.

of discretion that is quite varied, and more times than not, dependent on funding sources and program guidelines. Twenty-four percent of respondents explained that they do their best to work within the parameters of particular programs to meet people's specific needs. For example, one respondent stated, "We have agency discretion in some areas and use it there. Other areas of policy must have absolute consistency per federal funding guidelines." Nineteen percent explained that because their programs are federally regulated, they have no discretion and "have to be careful not to discriminate or even give the appearance of discrimination." In the words of one respondent, giving special consideration is impossible because the program is federally regulated: "There is no room for subjectivity."

On the other hand, 21% of respondents stated that they provide assistance based on individual needs and circumstances. They described organizational policies that were attuned to "each person's individuality" and how these supported the organization's mission to offer "services to all who come." One respondent highlighted the fact that giving special consideration is "essential since the core of our service is to recognize and support the concepts of 'we're all in this together' and 'lifting the individual lifts the whole community.'" Seventeen percent give special consideration in differing circumstances such as providing specific dietary foods to those who need them, expediting applications, or waiving co-payments. As one respondent pointed out, many service providers work hard and "try to 'go the extra mile' to make [getting services] as easy and painless as possible."

"We have agency discretion in some areas and use it there. Other areas of policy must have absolute consistency, per federal funding guidelines."

-Service provider

Limiting the Use of Services

When asked whether their organization limited the number of times a person or family could use their services, 40.7% of respondents remarked that there were no limits. Thirty percent stated that their organization limited a person or family to a specific number of visits, while 10.5% said that limiting services was at the discretion of the organization's service providers. Table 5.2 illustrates service providers' specific responses to this item.

Do You Limit the Use of Services?	Frequency	Percentage
Yes – Limited to specific number of times	26	30.2
Yes – At service providers' discretion	9	10.8
No limit to use of services	38	44.2
Not applicable to the services offered	9	10.5

Dependent upon specific services within program	4	4.3
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Table 5.2: Service Providers' Responses on Limiting the Use of Services

Twenty-five percent of additional comments indicated that respondents set limits at a certain point that is either mandated by policies or guidelines and/or related to client behavior or perceived abuse. With respect to guidelines, one respondent stated, “Our service is available as long as a household is income qualified and follows program requirements.” Others said they “set boundaries if we feel the person needs them” or “if we feel they are abusing [overusing the services].” Another 18.9% commented that they set limits not because of guidelines or behavior, but rather, because their organization has either limited supplies or limited funding. For example, one respondent remarked, “If we didn’t limit, we could run out of food. Some people might waste food while others go hungry.” Some service providers in this category point out that much of what they provide is contingent upon grant funding and budgets. Their responses indicate the difficulty of addressing increased need in the community when resources are finite.

Other organizations, however, have no limit whatsoever to the number of times people can receive their services. Respondents in this category stated that they help people as needed, keeping their “doors open so we are always seen as a safe place people can come to seek help.” A number of other respondents mentioned that whether they limit services depends on the program, while others said that though their organization does have limits, they are always able to make exceptions for people in need. In the words of one respondent, “We do have limits, but if there is a true need we always make exceptions.”

Reasons for Ineligibility

Service providers were asked to share the most common reason people were found ineligible for services. Although 12% of respondents remarked that “ineligibility” does not apply to their organization because no one is denied services, 40% claimed that “being over-income” was the most common reason. Not meeting income guidelines and/or resource/asset guidelines compromises many people’s ability to access services. One respondent wrote, “Generally it is due to a participant [being] over the income standards. It would be nice to see our elderly on fixed incomes not have to count their unearned income. It hurts them in getting [food] stamps.”

Other respondents remarked that being ineligible for services is often caused by people’s failure to return necessary paperwork, provide necessary verifications, and/or adhere to program requirements. Some claimed that age was a crucial factor in determining eligibility

for their organizations' services, particularly for senior services that required potential recipients to be at least 60 years old. Alcohol or drug use, disruptive behavior, and a criminal record were also included as factors contributing to ineligibility for services.

Best Practices

The survey asked respondents what policies and procedures they thought made it easier for people to access their organizations' services. Twenty percent of respondents pointed to convenient hours that accommodated people's work schedules. Another 20% correlated ease of access to the lack of formal requirements and turning no one away who needed help. For example, one respondent wrote, "We serve low-income, no-income, homeless, working poor people. We don't turn anyone away...basically it's our philosophy." Another mentioned, "We allow anyone and everyone to use services. They don't have to 'qualify.'"

Respondents were aware of the importance of having employees who are helpful, kind, and sensitive. They explained how crucial it is to foster a "welcoming environment [where] clients are a priority." One respondent wrote, "The quality of staff goes a long way in making the services accessible; you need staff that care about the people they are helping and not just bringing home a paycheck." Others cited their ability to answer people's questions and provide appropriate referrals as positive aspects of their program that make them easily accessible. Helpful policies and procedures included streamlined applications and/or same-day interviews, convenient locations, and sliding fee scales. While many service users saw rules as barriers to access, some service providers had a different perspective. For example, one respondent wrote, "We consider our rules guidelines, not rigid criteria. We bend over backwards to find ways to make clients/applicants eligible."

"We serve low-income, no-income, homeless, working poor people. We don't turn anyone away . . . basically it's our philosophy."

-Service provider

Improving Access to Services

Respondents provided a number of suggestions for how to improve access to services. Their responses seemed to relate to the fact that many who are eligible for certain assistance programs do not participate. Although some had no recommendations for change, others commented on the need for more funds, resources, and/or staff to improve and expand access to their organizations' services. They suggested extending hours, finding new space, adding to existing space, providing transportation, or creating satellite services in poorly-served neighborhoods and rural areas in the county. Recognizing that many people who are

eligible for services do not apply, respondents called for more outreach, advertising, and public education to inform people about the resources available in Missoula County.

Evaluating Clients' Satisfaction with Services

The survey contained an item asking whether service providers formally evaluated their clients' satisfaction with the services they received. This item was included in the survey to assess the degree to which service users had a mechanism for contributing feedback to service organizations. Sixty-seven percent of respondents reported having an evaluation process to measure clients' satisfaction, while 28% reported they did not. Approximately 5% of respondents were uncertain whether their organizations had evaluation processes in place.

Evaluation methods most commonly used by programs were surveys, questionnaires, interviews, and follow-up calls. Some respondents reported satisfaction percentages for their particular programs, which speak to more formalized evaluation procedures. Forty-three percent of those who evaluate client satisfaction do so informally. Procedures primarily relied on service providers to recognize dissatisfaction or on clients to voice their concerns. For example, 22% of the respondents in this group commented that their clients are satisfied, and if they were dissatisfied "they would have no problem telling someone." One respondent wrote, "The caseworker usually has an idea about their satisfaction or dissatisfaction." Another commented, "The residents let me know what they think of the program – nothing official." Although informal evaluation processes are more the norm in many service programs, these are based on the assumption that people in unequal positions of power, as is true in the case of people with limited income, will willingly and easily voice their concerns. However, given the context, these expectations may not be accurate, especially when satisfaction level is reported to someone who has considerable control over whether or not someone receives services. For service users the stakes are high.

SUMMARY

This chapter describes the findings from a survey administered to 86 service providers in Missoula County. The survey gave service providers an opportunity to be reflective and candid, and while not exhaustive, its findings provide a window into the world of service providers. When compared to the information collected from the individual interviews (see Chapter 4) and the town hall meeting (see Chapter 6), the survey results are remarkably consistent.

Sixty-two percent of respondents were employed by non-profit organizations that provide a variety of services ranging from referrals to direct assistance. Almost half of all surveyed

service providers had direct or indirect experience with the social service system. High housing cost was reported as the most significant cost of living issue for their clients. Approximately 75% of respondents noted an increased need for services, which they overwhelmingly attributed to Missoula County's high cost of living. The majority of survey respondents remarked that they were able to give special consideration to clients based on differing circumstances, and while some organizations limited the number of times someone could access services, 40% said that their organization does not limit the number of times a person could receive services. According to service providers, the most common reason people were found ineligible for services was because their income was too high.

Survey respondents noted the importance of having convenient hours and locations, and the need to be welcoming and respectful towards everyone who requests services. They recommended a variety of changes to improve access to services, most of which aimed to address the fact that many people who are eligible for services do not receive them. They commented about improving accessibility by extending hours and providing transportation. They discussed the need for more funding and also for conducting more outreach to poorly served neighborhoods and rural communities. On the whole, service providers wanted to address increased need in the community by ensuring that everyone who needs services and is eligible for them receives them.

CHAPTER 6

Service Providers Speak Out

INTRODUCTION

This chapter describes the methods, data analysis, and findings from a town hall meeting held in March of 2007 with service providers – both direct service employees and service program administrators. As mentioned in Chapter 3, using town hall meetings, combined with focus groups, created an opportunity for service providers to meet and discuss the services their organizations offer, concerns they have regarding program access, and experiences with and creative solutions to funding pressures. The town hall meeting format, which included opportunities for small and large group discussion, gave participants a chance to collectively generate recommendations for change to address cost of living issues in Missoula County.

PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURES

Participants

Thirty-one service providers attended the town hall meeting. Twenty-seven (87%) were females and 4 (13%) were males. Almost 94% had at least a 4-year college degree and 26% had completed a graduate degree. Numbers of years employed at their organizations ranged from several months to 22 years. Forty-five percent had been employed at their organizations between 1 and 5 years, although 19% had been there less than one year. More than half of the people in attendance worked for organizations that offered multiple services, many of which provided assistance for people seeking affordable housing. Besides services to address many basic needs, organizations offered affordable healthy food, case management and referrals, cash assistance, rental and utility assistance, Medicaid waivers, and laundry facilities and showers. Table 6.1 provides a comprehensive list of the types of services provided by participants' organizations.¹

¹ Percentages and frequencies do not add up to 100 because many programs offer multiple services.

Types of Services Provided	Frequency	Percent
Affordable housing	18	58.1
Food assistance	15	48.4
Health care	12	38.7
Transportation	9	29.0
Employee training	9	29.0
Child care	8	25.8
Employment services	8	25.8
Welfare benefits	2	6.5

Table 6.1: Services Provided by Town Hall Meeting II Participants

Procedures

Participants were recruited through direct contacts with organizations. The town hall meeting followed many of the same procedures used to facilitate the town hall meeting described in Chapter 3 for service users. A steering committee member who was the program operations' manager of the local food bank spoke of her involvement with the FSFI project and the importance of creating a forum where service providers could share their experiences and offer suggestions for how to address cost of living issues in the county. The meeting was held at the Missoula County Public Library for two hours in the middle of the day so providers could attend during their lunch hour.

Participants were seated in five small focus groups each with its own flip chart, facilitator, and scribe. Each focus group, with the exception of one, was facilitated by a FSFI steering committee member who had direct experience with food insecurity. Each group responded to the following questions:

1. What aspects of your organization do you think make a difference in addressing cost of living issues for your clients and why?
2. What do you think is difficult for your clients in accessing your organization's services?
3. What are some of the external pressures faced by your organization?
4. What are some of the creative ways you or others in your organization have responded to these pressures?
5. What changes would you make to your program or services to better address cost of living issues?
6. What changes would you make in Missoula County to better address cost of living

issues?

Small group discussion lasted approximately one hour. Flip chart responses for each group were taped on the meeting room walls. During the break, participants had the opportunity to walk around the room and review the responses generated by each group. A large group discussion convened following the break. Participants were asked to discuss the themes they noted on the flip chart paper and what they thought might be missing.

Following the meeting, all responses listed on the flip charts from each group were typed and compiled. Content analysis was conducted on each question to identify broad themes and sub-themes. To ensure reliability, steering committee members reviewed the flip chart data individually before conferring as a group.

SERVICE PROVIDERS' PERSPECTIVES

Services that Make a Difference

When asked what aspects of their organizations they felt made a difference in addressing cost of living issues for service users, participants spoke about the types of services their organizations offered. They described low cost medical care, free mental health counseling, grant sources for medications, transitional housing, rental assistance, low interest loans and homeownership opportunities, energy assistance and weatherization, emergency food programs, outreach for federal nutrition programs, and a plethora of job training opportunities. They also highlighted the networking, information sharing, and referrals that occur among service programs in the county. Furthermore, they discussed sliding fee scales, co-payments for services, and same-day and telephone interviews to expedite services for someone with an immediate need for assistance or for whom getting to an office appointment might pose a hardship.

Cost of Living Barriers to Food Security

Town hall meeting participants were asked what issues they thought created the most difficulties for their clients in terms of compromising their ability to feed themselves and their families. The top three factors were (1) high cost of housing, (2) low wages, and (3) high health care costs. Table 6.2 illustrates service providers' perceptions of the cost of living issues that most seriously affect their client's ability to eat well. These are listed in order of most importance.²

² Percentages and frequencies do not add up to 100 because respondents were asked to check as many issues as they thought applied. These were then rank ordered based on the frequency of responses.

Issues that Affect Clients' Efforts to Feed Themselves and Their Families	Frequency	Percent
High housing costs	29	93.5
Low wages	28	90.3
High health/medical costs	25	80.6
Transportation availability	21	67.7
High fuel/heating costs	20	64.5
High child care costs	14	45.2
Lack of jobs	14	45.2

Table 6.2: Service Providers' Perceptions of Barriers to Food Security

Other Factors that Compromise Access to Services

Participants discussed a broad range of issues they believed created barriers to access for people with limited income. These were attributed to service user issues or to organizational constraints. Lack of knowledge about the services available was a dominant theme among participants. They believed it was difficult to “get the word out” about changes in program guidelines and procedures and often “word of mouth” was a source of misinformation about

eligibility qualifications and assistance opportunities. Another dominant theme concerned the complexity of people’s lives, especially overburdened single parents with too many obligations and limited extra time to participate in programs. One participant commented that half of all scheduled appointments are missed or rescheduled.

“Public transportation is perfect for the middle class but not at all helpful for people with low incomes. The routes are limited and it’s not available at night or on Saturdays.”
-Service provider

Organizational problems included long waiting lists for services (“83 slots for Medicaid waivers in all of Montana”), especially in the area of housing (“6 months to one year waiting list for transitional housing”), and “harsh” guidelines and regulations that demanded strict compliance on the part

of potential recipients and allowed no leeway for the daily crises experienced by people with few resources. One participant commented on the strict work-related activities that are required to receive welfare benefits, which are very “hard for single mothers and people who are sick.” If people do not comply, sanctions are imposed: The first time an adult is sanctioned, benefits are taken away from the individual; the second time, benefits are taken away from the entire family for one month. Participants also described the “nightmare paper

chase for employees and clients,” due to cumbersome application processes and excessive paperwork requirements. Another notable area of concern was transportation. One participant stated, “Public transportation is perfect for the middle class but not at all helpful for people with low income. The routes are limited and it’s not available at night or on Saturdays.”

External Pressure

Participants remarked about the drastic cuts in funding at both state and federal levels and the resultant staff shortages. The current funding crisis, with a diminishing social contract and competition for funding among local services for survival, was the most contentious external pressure faced by administrators and direct service workers. One participant commented, “Funding is static. It doesn’t increase with costs.” Participants described a community climate where no less than 2,200 nonprofit organizations may compete often for the same pot of funds. In addition, funding streams carry with them specific criteria and regulations. For example, in the words of one service provider, “A domestic abuse survivor can only stay in the shelter for 60 days – mandated by the grant – but this isn’t enough time to flee an abusive relationship.”

“Funding is static.
It doesn’t increase
with costs.”

-Service provider

Coupled with the issue of funding pressures is a lack of administrative discretion: “We can only do what we can do.” Programs are generally “ruled by the policy procedures mandated by the legislature,” which ends up making service providers who depend on state and federal funds feel like their “hands are tied.” A number of participants expressed their frustration about being squeezed or “caught in the middle” between what clients need and what funding sources will allow. Additional frustration was expressed about the need to become more politically active from their positions as service providers but how “time consuming it is to organize and testify” and how they often “learn about legislative updates at the very last minute.” One participant remarked about “how helpful and important it would be for legislators to visit agencies.”

Creative Responses to Organizational Pressures

Participants commented on the creative ways in which they responded to external pressures. Foremost, they sought out alternative sources of funding that included private contributions, fundraising, and “broader grant opportunities.” They hired grant writers, sought co-payments from service users, and tried to attract more volunteers. Establishing community partnerships, collaborations, coalitions, and networks were addressed as a matter of

Participants talked about the need to make their presence known in the community through “positive press.”

organizational survival. Programs formed partnerships to write grants for the mutual benefit of a number of organizations. They worked on forming cooperative relationships within the community. They discussed collaborating with multiple groups both locally and regionally to build a strong power base for action. Seeking out services from other community organizations and making referrals was also another way in which providers sought to create a “safety net” for people with limited income.

Another dominant theme that emerged regarding creative responses to external pressure concerned public education. Participants talked about the need to make their presence known in the community through “positive press.” Many spoke about the potential of various forms of media to address stereotypes, challenge assumptions, and dispel myths about people who use services. Using media to inform and educate the community helps to reduce the stigma commonly associated with asking for help in a culture where self-sufficiency and independence are prized.

SUGGESTIONS FOR ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

Participants discussed numerous options for creating change within their organizations to better address cost of living issues. They commented on the need for transition periods with financial support so service users could gradually get back on their feet when their income increased through employment or when they received a housing voucher. Participants also pointed out the gaps in the service system. They recommended “having some type of on-site savings’ program for people when they need a security deposit or their car breaks down,” establishing an emergency shelter for homeless families with children, and creating a community center that employed a caseworker whose primary function would be to connect people to resources, especially employment.

Additional funding, more partnerships, better accessibility, and extended outreach were also discussed as potential changes that could “galvanize collective energy,” address “skewed funding priorities that support more prisons and less social services,” increase the Medicaid reimbursement rate, and adjust the poverty line to include more families. Participants also suggested increasing the hours programs are open to include weekends, early mornings, and evenings to accommodate people who work but still must rely on assistance to make ends meet. More outreach was also recommended to recruit additional volunteers, to extend

services to rural areas and neighborhoods in the county with high poverty rates, and to attract more donors to help fund more services.

SUGGESTIONS FOR CREATING CHANGE IN MISSOULA COUNTY

When speaking more broadly about changes participants would make in Missoula County as a whole to better address cost of living issues, housing was by far the most discussed topic. A number of participants mentioned the need for “truly affordable housing” and how few people in Missoula County can afford down payments, hefty mortgages, and the escalating cost of rentals. Participants recommended rent subsidies and the need for “more emergency financial assistance for housing.” Many mentioned the need to get creative and to consider co-housing opportunities and permanent supportive housing to end homelessness.

Although the minimum wage was raised in Montana from \$5.15 to \$6.15 during the last legislative session, low wages was another important issue discussed by town hall meeting participants. They voiced concern about how even slight raises in income affect benefits. An increase in wages means a decrease in benefits. How this plays out according to service providers is that it creates a double bind where some service users might be better off financially without a raise in pay.

In addition to housing and low wages, participants discussed the need for a centralized database for applications, creating a “one-stop service center,” initiating a living wage, conducting more public education “about the real needs” in the county, and getting more creative about how to address health care. Childcare and transportation were also noted as areas that were in need of improvement. Participants voiced the need for more infant child care providers and for quality child care in the evenings and on weekends for people who use services but are not employed at a traditional 8 to 5 job.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Town hall meeting participants described numerous services their organizations provide for Missoula County residents with limited income. They also emphasized the formal and informal networking that occurs among programs and creative approaches to service delivery. According to service providers, the top three cost of living issues that most affect the people they serve were the high cost of housing, low wages, and high health care costs. Other factors that compromise people’s ability to access services included misinformation about eligibility guidelines, difficulties getting the word out about changes in services or the addition of new ones, and the very stressful nature of people’s lives. Long waiting lists, especially for housing, and the rigid and often harsh regulations that accompanied

participation, primarily in federally funded programs, also decreased their accessibility. These were experienced by service users as overly punitive and by service providers as cumbersome, especially in terms of the paperwork involved, and excessive in terms of “the hoops people had to jump through” in order to receive assistance. Problems with accessibility also manifested themselves in very practical ways with transportation being one of the most common complaints. This issue was particularly relevant for people with disabilities. Service providers seemed especially aware of how services were tailored more to people employed at day jobs who earned enough to afford child care and gas for their cars instead of people with limited income.

External pressure on programs was also another important theme that resonated for service providers. In the context of a diminishing social contract, program survival depends upon competing for limited funds and these generally come with strings attached. Policies and procedures established at state and federal levels can have little, if any, connection to local realities. In other words, what works well where a program was pilot tested by the federal government does not necessarily fit for Missoula County, Montana. Service providers expressed their frustration and discussed the need to spend more time advocating for the people they serve to maintain the services they provide. Given the current political and economic climate, collaborating with other organizations was viewed as essential for survival.

Suggestions for how to address these issues included the need for transition periods and creating on-site services in areas where transportation issues are prevalent. Service providers explained how increasing program hours and being more flexible with scheduling would increase access to services. Speaking more broadly about Missoula County, service providers recommended addressing affordable housing, low wages, and the need for child care.

COMPARING KEY FINDINGS FROM INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS, THE SURVEY, AND THE TOWN HALL MEETING

Although the questions posed to administrators varied somewhat across the three different methods used to gather information for the study, there are more similarities apparent in the findings than there are differences. In fact, the combination of individual interviews, small and large group discussion (town hall meeting), and the privacy and confidentiality afforded by the administration of a survey provided a comprehensive and complimentary approach to information gathering. The idea of *triangulation* is powerfully represented in the study. The meaning of triangulation originates from surveyors and sailors who measured distances

between objects by making observations from multiple positions.³ Applied to research it means that looking at something through multiple lenses produces a rich, more nuanced analysis. In other words, two heads (or even more) are better than one. Besides using a variety of methods, the study made use of numerous researchers and the use of multiple perspectives to interpret the same information.⁴ Working together as a group to analyze the data challenged everyone to consider different perspectives. What emerged from the dialogue was a truly unique way of looking at the material, one that challenged and changed individual assumptions about how things work.

Table 6.3 compares the themes that emerged across individual interviews, the survey, and the town hall meeting and illustrates where commonalities among service providers exist. Themes are grouped according to the barriers that compromise food access on personal, organizational, and structural levels and the opportunities generated by service providers for addressing food access within their organizations, the community, and larger political and economic structures.⁵ Certainly, there are a number of ways to think about the usefulness of this information. For example, note the agreement among service providers in the organizational barriers category, especially in regards to lengthy applications, rigid eligibility requirements, and the lack of service provider discretion, primarily in federally funded programs, to make eligibility decisions based on special or unusual circumstances. Another point of comparison is the unanimous recommendation to conduct a media campaign to inform the community about the resources and programs that are available, new programs that have been developed, and changes to existing programs' eligibility requirements. In the final section of the report we summarize the findings from *Food Insecurity in Missoula County*, present the combined suggestions for change from service users and service providers, and discuss possibilities for launching the FSFI Project into its next phase – taking action to ensure that all Missoula County residents have access to healthy, nutritious food.

³ Neuman, W.L. & Kreuger, L. (2003). *Social work research methods: Qualitative and quantitative applications*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon, p. 137.

⁴ Janesick, V. (1994). The dance of qualitative research design: Metaphor, methodolatry, and meaning. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 209-219). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

⁵ As described in Chapter 3, we constructed this framework to ease understanding of the voluminous amounts of information gathered in the study.. We are aware there is overlap with some issues between categories. For example, while we attribute “no transition off of services” to an organizational barrier, this particular issue is tied to funding regulations that may be outside of an organization’s control. Nonetheless, the benefit of the framework is that it provides a way to visually represent information and it suggests some ideas about the level at which creating change might occur.

Barriers to and Opportunities for Food Security	Individual Interviews	Surveys	Town Hall Meeting
Individual Barriers (related to service users) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ not returning paperwork/verification ▪ alcohol/drug abuse, mental illness ▪ income too high ▪ lack of knowledge/misinformation re: services ▪ overstressed/too many obligations 		▣	
Organizational Barriers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ lengthy, cumbersome applications ▪ lack of discretion for special circumstances ▪ lengthy waiting lists for services ▪ no transition periods off of services 	▣	▣	▣
Community and Structural Barriers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ low wages ▪ high cost of housing ▪ high health care costs ▪ rigid eligibility requirements/rules ▪ transportation ▪ increased need vs. decreased funding ▪ lack of child care 	▣	▣	▣
Organizational Level Opportunities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ view relationships as a top priority ▪ provide more than services ▪ collaborate more with other organizations ▪ lower eligibility income limits ▪ reduce requirements/paperwork/rules ▪ allow more discretion for special circumstances ▪ ensure welcoming, respectful treatment ▪ extend hours/create more convenient locations ▪ create transition periods off of services 	▣	▣	▣
Community and Structural Level Opportunities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ conduct media campaign re: service availability & eligibility ▪ conduct media campaign to dispel myths re: service users ▪ initiate outreach to underserved areas ▪ engage in political activism and advocacy ▪ create service center, centralized data base ▪ adjust poverty line ▪ make housing affordable 	▣	▣	▣

- address low wages
- expand public transportation
- create more affordable child care options

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Table 6.3: Service Provider Identified Barriers and Opportunities for Food Security

PART III

Finding Common Ground and Moving Toward Action

INTRODUCTION

The primary objective of the *Food Insecurity in Missoula County* report is to stimulate dialogue about creating a food system where all community residents are assured a place at the table. Accomplishing this task poses incredible challenges. Nonetheless, it is an important first step toward being able to respond to the following question: How can we achieve sustainability, while at the same time, secure sustenance for all?¹ This is a critical question to consider, one that links land and people, agriculture and food consumption. However, there are no quick and easy solutions.

Everyone who participated in the study was asked to share their ideas about how to address food insecurity and the high cost of living in Missoula County. The most remarkable finding for those of us guiding the project and immersed in the data was not a novel solution for how to address food insecurity, nor was it the fact that many more people are eligible for services than use them. It was the common ground shared by service users and service providers. Across both surveys, both town hall meetings, and the individual interviews, perceptions about the barriers to and opportunities for food security are strikingly consistent.

Part III of *Food Insecurity in Missoula County* summarizes the study's findings, synthesizes the opportunities for creating change collected across all three methods, and discusses what might be the most immediate next steps to take as a response to the question, "Where do we go from here?" A comprehensive plan for action, however, is not provided. It needs to be created. The ideas and suggestions presented here aim to be a catalyst for such an action

¹ Patricia Allen, Associate Director for Sustainable Food Systems at the University of California at Santa Cruz engages in a similar discussion in her book, "*Together at the Table: Sustainability and Sustenance in the American Agrifood System.*" University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University. (2004). Allen thoughtfully addresses the difficult yet important work of bringing together diverse groups of community people to map out a coherent vision of the food system. Attention to divisions of class and other markers of social difference are imperative in order to forge both social and environmental justice. Allen points out how, "We are all involved and we are all implicated." To make the vision of everyone "together at the table" a reality, we must become more proficient at working across difference.

plan, one informed by people with limited income and executed by concerned citizens working together to ensure everyone has a voice in the decision making process. What follows, therefore, not only hopes to ignite discussion about food security in Missoula County, but also about participation in decision making and policy making processes more generally.

BARRIERS TO FOOD INSECURITY: FINDING COMMON GROUND

Service Users

Service users who participated in the study expressed considerable frustration with the state of Missoula County's economy. They pointed to the difficulty of putting food on the table when wages are low and housing, utilities, and healthcare costs are high. Those struggling to make ends meet make sacrifices and cope in a variety of ways. Many cut the size of their meals or skip them to make their food dollars stretch. They go to extraordinary lengths to ensure their children never go hungry. They seek help from Missoula County's service organizations as a last resort, after they have exhausted all other possibilities. There are services they decide not to apply for even though they might be eligible. The number one reason they voiced for not applying was, "Someone else needs it more than I do."

Service users found Missoula County's local, non-profit services far easier to access than federal and state funded services. They praised local, non-profit services for their easy applications, little to no eligibility requirements, quick turnaround times for appointments and assistance, and the considerate and respectful treatment they receive. Federal and state funded services, on the other hand, were repeatedly noted for their excessive paperwork, small benefit amounts, inconsiderate treatment, long waiting lists, and strict eligibility requirements that fail to consider rising cost of living expenses and special or unusual life circumstances, and provide no transition period off of assistance.

A Note on Inconsiderate Treatment and Federal Assistance Programs

When we speak of inconsiderate treatment our intention here is not to glorify "home grown" services and denigrate federal assistance programs. On the contrary, the importance of federal assistance programs as a first line of defense against food insecurity can not be overstated. However, services are structured and influenced by guidelines and funding constraints. These complicate the roles of service providers employed at these organizations. Their jobs are to determine eligibility and to be gatekeepers to ensure the equitable distribution of finite funds for assistance. Rules and guidelines shape relationships between service users and service providers: One service user remarked, "She thought this was her stuff and I was trying to take more than my share." The inconsiderate treatment service

users described in the study can be accounted for, at least in part, by this gatekeeper role. Furthermore, in response to the disparity between eligibility for federal assistance programs and participation rates (i.e., more people are eligible but do not apply for services), it is not uncommon to hear that if federal assistance programs are underused then perhaps they ought to be eliminated. However, the primary issues here are how to adapt programs to better fit local realities and how to modify requirements so people can and will use them.

Service Providers

Service providers noted frustration with the economy as well, both in its effects on their clients and their organizations. Providers at the town hall meeting said the top cost of living issues that affected their clients were high housing costs, low wages, and high healthcare costs. Almost all service providers in the study attributed the increased need for services to low wages and the high costs of living in Missoula County. At the same time, however, providers overwhelmingly agreed that while need for services is increasing, funding for services is decreasing. Disinvestment in social service programs at the federal level poses grave challenges for those struggling to meet growing needs in the community. Organizational survival in the current political/economic context is dependent on collaborating, networking, and forming local and regional partnerships and coalitions to amass more resources to affect change. How to meet community needs and how to secure additional funding is a constant juggling act. Much like service users, service providers find themselves being forced to make tough choices about how to address growing needs with fewer and fewer resources.

Fundamental differences exist between local, non-profit services, and federal and state funded services. Local, non-profit services are far more likely to have discretion over their eligibility requirements and program policies. Service providers employed at these organizations talk more readily about developing relationships with their clients and “touching them in the long term.” Federal and state funded services are more likely to have an extensive application process and rigid eligibility requirements. As a result, employees of these organizations were more likely to point out individual barriers to food security such as failure to return application paperwork or eligibility verification information. They expressed considerable frustration with how to address misinformation about program guidelines and the difficulty of getting the word out to potential service users, especially when guidelines keep changing.

Service providers also voiced the need to challenge the general public’s assumptions of service users as greedy people who will abuse the system if only given the chance. Like

service users, they talked about how excessive paperwork, rigid regulations, and long waiting lists were barriers to accessing services and therefore, compromised food security. The most common reason service providers found people ineligible for services was because their income was too high. Once again, this issue reflects on federal income eligibility guidelines that set the amount for receiving assistance too low. In other words, and what we heard repeatedly throughout the study, more and more people who make higher incomes are in need of services but they are deemed ineligible.

To provide a visual representation for ease of understanding, Table A illustrates the common ground shared by services users and service providers regarding their perceptions of the barriers to food security. The table was developed by compiling the areas of convergence from Table 3.1 (barriers identified by service users) and from Table 6.3 (barriers identified by service providers). If both service users and service providers identified the same or a very similar barrier to food security, it is represented in Table A.² However, the significance of “unmatched” items for both service users and service providers should not be ignored. They too, can contribute to fruitful discussion in subsequent dialogue regarding the study’s findings.

Barriers to Food Security	Service Users	Service Providers
Individual Barriers (related to service users) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ lack of knowledge/misinformation re: services ▪ overstressed/too many obligations 	□ □	□ □
Organizational Barriers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ lengthy, cumbersome applications ▪ lack of discretion for special circumstances ▪ lengthy waiting lists for services ▪ no transition periods off of services 	□ □ □ □	□ □ □ □
Community and Structural Barriers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ low wages ▪ high cost of housing ▪ high health care costs ▪ inflexible federal income eligibility guidelines 	□ □ □ □	□ □ □ □

Table A: Common Themes: Barriers to Food Security Identified by Service Users and Service Providers

² We chose to include those items that evidenced the greatest strength in the data, those themes that emerged with the most frequency. Because three different research methods were used to collect data from service providers, Table A represents those items endorsed in the data from at least two of the methods used. So, for example, although service users in both the survey and the town hall meeting identified the need to “provide more than services,” service providers only endorsed this item in the individual interviews. Therefore, this item is not represented in the table.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR FOOD SECURITY: FINDING COMMON GROUND

Reviewing the suggestions made by service users and service providers to address the barriers to food security illuminates considerable common ground and bodes well for potential change in Missoula County's food system. Service users and service providers have historically been pitted against each other in a complex helping system filled with many contradictions regarding care and control. The power dynamics at play are rarely acknowledged but one group has *power over* the other group – the power to give or withhold assistance. All too often solutions consist of providing skills and support to help people with limited income better cope with food insecurity instead of concurrently challenging its structural causes. Solutions focused solely on “fixing people” and not also on broader, structural arrangements, have little chance of sustainability.

Service Users

Referring to Table 3.1 (see Chapter 3), we summarize below the ideas for change suggested by service users to improve access to services and to address the high cost of living in Missoula County. They proposed the following:

- Reduce paperwork, simplify the application process, and minimize program requirements;
- Change income eligibility guidelines to reflect the rising cost of living;
- Create a transition period off of services;
- Create policies allowing organizations more discretion to determine how best to address local realities;
- Develop a centralized database for applicants and a clearinghouse for program and eligibility information;
- Extend hours and create more convenient locations;
- Ensure welcoming and respectful treatment;
- View relationships as a priority;
- Address the structural causes of food insecurity – create more affordable housing and implement a living wage, and;
- Create more participatory decision making processes so service users can be involved in the important decisions that affect their lives.

Service Providers

Referring to Table 6.3 (see Chapter 6), we summarize below the ideas for change suggested by service providers to improve access to programs and to address the high cost of living in Missoula County. Many of the ideas presented here are similar to those suggested by service users. Service providers proposed the following:

- Reduce paperwork, simplify application processes, and minimize program requirements;
- Decrease income eligibility limits and eliminate too many eligibility rules;
- Create a transition period off of services;
- Allow more discretion for special circumstances;
- Make sure services have convenient hours and locations;
- Ensure welcoming and respectful treatment;
- Extend hours and create more convenient locations;
- Conduct a media campaign to inform county residents of service availability and eligibility guidelines;
- Initiate outreach to poorly served neighborhoods and rural areas in the county;
- Engage in political activism and advocacy;
- Address the structural causes of food insecurity – create more affordable housing and address low wages;
- Expand public transportation;
- Create more affordable child care options, and;
- Adjust the poverty line.

To more fully examine the common ground shared by service users and service providers, Table B illustrates the areas of convergence regarding ideas for how to remedy the barriers identified to food security. The same methods were used to develop both Table A and Table B. If both service users and service providers identified the same or a very similar opportunity to address food security, it is represented on Table B (see page 74 for further elaboration on the methods used).

Opportunities for Food Security	Service Users	Service Providers
Organizational Level Opportunities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ reduce requirements/paperwork/rules ▪ ensure welcoming, respectful treatment ▪ extend hours, create more convenient locations ▪ create transition periods off of services 	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Community and Structural Level Opportunities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ conduct media campaign re: service availability & eligibility ▪ make housing affordable ▪ address low wages 	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Table B: Common Themes: Opportunities for Food Security Identified by Service Users and Service Providers

Finding so much common ground between service users and service providers here is inspiring. It suggests there are many opportunities for change and change has a much better chance of happening when people are allies working to reach the same goals. The common ground identified here must be our starting point if we hope to galvanize collective energies and work together toward the realization of a food secure Missoula County.

NEXT STEPS

Opportunities for improving food access take a variety of forms. Some of the items listed in Table B are short term solutions, such as extending hours, creating more convenient locations, ensuring welcoming and respectful treatment, reducing paperwork requirements and rules, creating transition periods off of services, and conducting a media campaign to inform the public about service availability and eligibility requirements. Addressing these issues would go a long way toward ensuring more people have access to services and specifically to those services that are currently not reaching everyone who is eligible. Others, however, such as creating “truly affordable” housing and addressing low wages either through living wage initiatives or creating better jobs, are long term solutions that aim to address structural factors that give rise to food insecurity. To effectively address food insecurity it is necessary to “keep our fingers on the near things and our eyes on the far things.”³ In other words, we should not lose sight of the bigger picture of food security as we tackle those issues that can be dealt with effectively at the organizational level. However, sustainable change is predicated on addressing structural issues.

To address the barriers to food security on organizational, community, and structural levels identified in the study and to take advantage of the opportunities available for change, the following initial steps are recommended:

- 1. To initiate a forum for ongoing dialogue between service users and service providers to inform program policies and procedures.** The primary objective of the forum would be to increase access to healthy, nutritious food for Missoula County residents with limited income. This forum would be the conduit for discussions and decision making about how to dismantle the barriers identified in this study to increase participation rates in federally funded food assistance programs. (Forum participants

³ See Chamber, C. (1963). *Seedtime of reform: American social service and social action – 1918-1933*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, p. 150.

would develop action plans for implementing the organizational opportunities cited in Table B.)

As mentioned in a previous section of the report, it was the initial intention of the FSFI Project to facilitate a third town hall meeting whose primary objective would be to bring together service users and service providers and provide them with a summary of the information we had compiled about barriers to and opportunities to food security. However, the project ran out of time and out of money. We have applied for funding specifically for the implementation of a forum as described above and await word on whether our request has been granted.

2. To develop a food policy for Missoula County that addresses food access and is informed by people with limited income. Internationally and across the United States, more communities have begun to recognize the wisdom in developing food policy that addresses food access and is informed by people who have direct experience with food insecurity.⁴ A food policy for Missoula County would directly address the health and well being of all community residents.⁵ A number of communities are finding it judicious to form multisector partnerships to develop long-range, cohesive plans to address the sustainability of local food systems.

Missoula County has already paved much of the ground to enable the proposed next steps to occur with relative ease. The infrastructure is in place. In the spring of 2005, a joint city/county resolution was passed to support the work of the Community Food and Agriculture Coalition (CFAC), a newly forming group of food system stakeholders. Now into its second year, the CFAC's mission "is to develop and strengthen Missoula County's food system by promoting sustainable agriculture, building regional self-reliance, and assuring all citizens equal access to healthy, affordable, and culturally appropriate food."⁶ The CFAC is a fertile site from which to develop food policy that can achieve both sustainability and sustenance for all Missoula County residents. The time is ripe to move forward: "We have more food than we have hunger. We have more resources than we have

⁴ In 2003, Brazil, for example, implemented a Zero Hunger Programme (ZHP), an integrated approach to food security throughout the entire country.

⁵ Toronto, Canada's largest city has won over 70 awards for quality, innovation, and efficiency especially in developing food policy. In the words of Dr. David McKeown, Toronto's Medical Officer of Health, "When people don't have enough money to buy healthy food – they get sick. It's that simple. Eliminating poverty is the best medicine money can buy." For more information on the Toronto Food Policy Council see http://www.toronto.ca/health/tfpc_index.htm

⁶ Find more information on the Community Food and Agriculture Coalition at www.umt.edu/cfa

problems. It costs more not to solve the problem than to solve them. Now *that* is food for thought.”⁷

⁷ Quote from Wayne Roberts, Toronto Food Policy Council.