

REPORT TO THE UTAH STATE LEGISLATURE

FOOD SECURITY TASK FORCE

October 2021



Introduction ●

In 2020, Utah State Senator Luz Escamilla introduced Senate Bill 141 Task Force on Food Security. The purpose of this legislation was to create the Task Force on Food Security (the task force) to develop a plan for establishing food security in the state.

As stated in the legislation, the plan shall include recommendations for:

- increasing economic security for all individuals in the state;
- increasing public awareness and understanding that ending hunger is vital to the health and well-being of the state's residents, economy and communities;
- increasing access to affordable, nutritious and culturally appropriate food within the community where an individual lives;
- increasing the number of individuals who can access nutritious food assistance through community-based organizations;
- maximizing enrollment in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) to improve food access and nutrition education;
- improving children's health by optimizing participation in federal child nutrition programs; and
- removing barriers for senior citizens to access food security.¹

The task force was established in late spring of 2021 and held its first meeting on June 23, where co-chairs were selected. Subsequently, three working groups were established to identify recommendations for the Utah State Legislature. The following workgroups were established: Economic Stability, Policy and Access to Healthy Foods, and Outreach and Community Food Resources.

Background ●

What is food insecurity?

Food insecurity is the limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods, or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways.² Food insecurity is generally a symptom of broader financial insecurity. Food is often one of the only variable expenses for households on a tight budget (as opposed to car payments, rent, etc.), which means it is frequently the first expense to be cut.

¹ SB 141 Task force on Food Security: <https://le.utah.gov/~2021/bills/static/SB0141.html>

² Definitions are from the Life Sciences Research Office, S.A. Andersen, ed., "Core Indicators of Nutritional State for Difficult to Sample Populations," *The Journal of Nutrition* 120:1557S-1600S, 1990.

How is food insecurity measured?

The U.S. Census Bureau conducts the U.S. Household Food Security Survey Module through the Current Population Survey on an annual basis. The Economic Research Institute analyses the data and reports it in the fall through the *Household Food Security in the United States*.³ The survey instrument consists of a series of 10 to 18 questions depending on whether or not the household has children between the ages of 0 and 17.

Survey results are based on a three-year average and measure:

- Food security
- Food insecurity
- Very low food security (labeled “food insecurity with hunger” prior to 2006)

Food Security in Utah ●

According to the recently released annual report *Household Food Security in the United States in 2020*⁴, food security rates across the country remained largely unchanged compared to last year’s data. Utah’s food insecurity rate was 10 percent compared to the national average of 10.7 percent.

One in 10 Utah households experience food insecurity and more than 102,000 Utah families do not have the resources to buy enough food. Investing in solutions to address food security pays off in increased health and wellbeing. According to the Colorado Blueprint to End Hunger (2018), increasing food security leads to:

- Reduced obesity, diabetes and malnutrition⁵
- Lowered risk of heart disease and high blood pressure^{6 7}
- Lower level of stress^{8 9}

3 Household Food Security in the United States: www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/measurement/

4 *Household Food Security in the United States in 2020*: www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/102076/err-298.pdf?v=4522.9

5 Seligman H, and Schillinger D, “Hunger and Socioeconomic Disparities in Chronic Disease,” *The New England Journal of Medicine*, July 2010: 363.

6 Ford E S, “Food Security and Cardiovascular Disease Risk Among Adults in the United States: Findings from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, 2003–2008,” *Preventing Chronic Disease*, Vol. 10, 2013: 130244.

7 Seligman H, Laraia B and Kushel M, “Food Insecurity is Associated with Chronic Disease Among Low-Income NHANES Participants,” *Journal of Nutrition*, Vol. 140, No. 2.

8 Seligman H, Laraia B and Kushel M, “Food Insecurity is Associated with Chronic Disease Among Low-Income NHANES Participants,” *Journal of Nutrition*, Vol. 140, No. 2, February 2010.

9 Laraia B., “Food Insecurity and Chronic Disease,” *Advances in Nutrition*, Vol. 4, March 2013.

- Decreased depression^{10 11}
- Significantly lower rates of suicide in adolescents¹²
- Decreased behavioral problems in youth¹³

Food insecurity disproportionately impacts children, female single parent households, seniors, people with disabilities, and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color communities (BIPOC). In the 2020 report, food insecurity in the following groups was noted as being significantly higher in Utah than the national average:¹⁴

- All households with children (14.8 percent)
- Households with children under age 6 (15.3 percent)
- Households with children headed by a single woman (27.7 percent) or a single man (16.3 percent)
- Households with Black, non-Hispanic (21.7 percent) and Hispanic (17.2 percent) household reference persons
- Households with incomes below 185 percent of the poverty threshold (28.6 percent)

Recommendations ●

The Food Security Task Force created three workgroups to refine and focus recommendations. The workgroups were chaired by task force members and each invited additional community members to participate.

Outreach and Community Resources

Purpose: Identify opportunities to strengthen the network of food pantries and food banks, and identify educational outreach opportunities for federal nutrition programs.

Economic Stability

Purpose: Identify public policies that would increase economic stability and reduce the demand for food assistance programs such as community food pantries.

10 Laraia B., “Food Insecurity and Chronic Disease,” *Advances in Nutrition*, Vol. 4, March 2013.

11 Whitaker R C, Phillips S M and Orzol S M, “Food Insecurity and the Risks of Depression and Anxiety in Mothers and Behavior Problems in Their Preschool-Aged Children, *Pediatrics*, Vol. 118, No. 3, 2006: e859-e868.

12 Alaimo K, Olson C M and Frongillo E A, “ Family Food Insufficiency, But Not Low Family Income, is Positively Associated with Dysthymia and Suicide Symptoms in Adolescents,” *Journal of Nutrition*, Vol. 132, No. 4, 2002: 719-725.

13 Kleinman R E, Murphy J M, Little M, Pagano M, Wehler C A, Regal K and Jellinek M S, “Hunger in Children in the United States: Potential Behavioral and Emotional Correlates,” *Pediatrics*, Vol. 101, No. 1, 1998.

14 www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/102076/err-298.pdf?v=4522.9

Policy and Access to Healthy Food

Purpose: Identify policy barriers that prevent low-income individuals and families from participating in federal nutrition programs, and to identify opportunities to increase access to fresh and whole foods as part of a healthy diet.

While the primary purpose of the Food Security Task Force was to identify policy, funding and community opportunities to increase food access for all Utahns, one of the directives from Senate Bill 141 also required that recommendations include increasing economic security for all individuals in the state.

Throughout the full task force meetings and the workgroups, the issues of income and housing were discussed as long-term solutions to address food security in the state. There was also a recognition that food pantries, federal nutrition programs and similar approaches are temporary solutions to a problem that requires systemic and systematic change. Food insecurity is closely related to housing insecurity, both of which are symptoms of poverty. There are policy opportunities to address both of these issues on a state level, and they should be addressed in tandem when communities, policy makers and elected officials are making decisions on how to increase the health and well-being of all Utahns.

Policy Recommendations to Address Income Inequality, and Housing Affordability

1. Increase the inventory of affordable housing.¹⁵
2. Address income disparity by increasing wages as a strategy to decrease food insecurity.¹⁶
3. Make higher education affordable by increasing legislative funds to the state funded Promise Scholarship¹⁷ and making programs like Promise and Learn & Work¹⁸ more accessible to all of Utah's underrepresented populations.

15 National Low Income Housing Coalition Out of Reach: <https://reports.nlihc.org/oor>

16 Increasing minimum wages: <https://frac.org/research/resource-library/leave-behind-raising-the-minimum-wage-a-key-strategy-to-end-hunger-in-america>.

17 Promise Scholarship: <https://ushe.edu/ushe-policies/r620-access-utah-promise-scholarship/>

18 Learn & Work: <https://inutah.org/learn-work/>

State-level Recommendations

1. Direct and provide funding for the State Nutrition Access Coalition (SNAC) to specifically examine root causes of food insecurity and coordinate statewide efforts to address these issues.¹⁹
2. Increase state funding for the Emergency Food Assistance (EFA) Fund program; current funding is approximately \$1.3 million annually.²⁰
3. Eliminate the state portion of the sales tax on unprepared food.²¹
4. Establish an annual state-wide conference on food security and appropriate \$50,000 in state funding to support this effort.²²
5. Improve access to safe, quality, and affordable daycare services to reduce the barrier to employment, especially for women. The state should explore opportunities to increase access to child care resources, including tax breaks to incentivize individuals to become childcare providers.

19 State Nutrition Action Coalition: https://extension.usu.edu/hsi/hsi_initiatives_pages/hsi_snac

Throughout the United States, State Nutrition Action Coalitions, or SNAC groups, are becoming more popular as a way to provide a wide range of quality nutrition programming to state residents. SNAC groups allow agencies with similar nutrition and wellness missions to leverage resources and knowledge, and reduce duplication of efforts, ultimately increasing the reach and impact of all the agencies involved. Utah's SNAC group was initially formed in 2005, but has continued to evolve and grow with the changing demographics and needs of Utah's population. Its mission is to unite Utah agencies to improve food security, nutrition and health for Utahns. The following organizations comprise Utah's coalition: Utah Department of Workforce Services, Create Better Health- SNAP-ED, Utah W.I.C. program, Utah Department of Health EPICC program, Utah State Board of Education, Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP), USU Extension, Utahns Against Hunger, Get Healthy Utah, and the International Rescue Committee.

20 Justification statements:

Government, private nonprofits and charitable food assistance programs are donating significant funds annually to assist families and individuals in need. Food pantries and the state should also increase funding for pantries statewide and for Area Associations of Government (AOGs). The State should fund public/private partnerships at the same level as private partners. All food assistance programs should continue to seek additional funding as well as apply for these state funds. Providing additional funding will assist in local efforts to expand the capabilities of food security and food assistance programs to reach more populations experiencing food insecurity and increase the local, fresh high-quality foods grown in Utah as well as increase culturally appropriate foods for diverse audiences. Programs should partner with other food assistance programs to provide outreach efforts including nutrition education, cooking from what is on hand, etc. The timing to increase funding is excellent as the state is experiencing General Fund surpluses and a large infusion of federal capital related to the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). Funds from these two sources should and can easily be diverted into expanded food security funding.

21 Putting grocery food tax on the table: www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0306919221000774#

22 Justification statements:

An annual conference would provide a venue for many public and private food security service agencies to coordinate and share valuable information and data about existing programs, efforts, successes and failures. A dissemination of information about the numerous existing services and programs that are functioning, successful and established could be shared in this venue.

The annual conference could highlight and offer a platform for the public to learn about food security, nutrition, nutrition education, food access, personal finance, sustainability and many other related educational topics surrounding sustainable and healthy food issues.

An annual event could provide a collaborative educational platform for expansion and creation of strategies like personal gardens, healthy nutritional practices, community gardens, volunteer opportunities, service and donation opportunities, outreach strategies to marginalized populations, improved coordinated education and outreach, and many other topics related to barriers to improved food access.

Utah has many outreach programs and through coordination efforts, programs can enhance and expand work through similar messaging, education and outreach efforts.

An annual conference, sponsored by the Utah Department of Health, Utah Department of Workforces services or another state entity, could also enlist the financial partnership of additional public and private donors such as Zions Bank, Merit Medical, Utah Power, Dominion Energy, Chevron and Flying J, established churches and many other large corporate sponsors and donors.

6. Include food security as an issue to be addressed by the Unified Economic Opportunity Commission (UEOC). The work of the UEOC is directly related to the economic well-being of all Utahns. Economic well-being should include food security as a metric and the UEOC is well positioned to include strategies to increase access to food.
7. Explore and adjust the eligibility tiers for public assistance benefits to ensure working parents in low-wage do not face the dilemma of experiencing a decrease in public benefits when they receive a modest increase in income. The state should explore existing innovative policy options that can ease the transition from public benefits to increased pay and financial independence²³ and work with our federal delegation to fix this issue on the federal level.
8. Examine and address barriers for enrollment in public assistance programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Medicaid, CHIP and child care. Many Utahns lack access to the internet and computers or are often unfamiliar with the application process making it difficult for them to access programs for which they are eligible. The state should also consider providing community grants to organizations providing application assistance for populations that face these barriers.
9. Explore opportunities for SNAP 2 Skills partnership with the Utah System of Higher Education as part of the SNAP Education and Training approach.²⁴

The Task Force also discussed recommendations that would require action on the federal level, these are the legislative issues that were identified that would reduce food insecurity.

Recommendations Requiring Federal Action

1. Support S. 2515 / H.R. 1919 – Enhanced Access To SNAP Act (Eats Act) of 2021²⁵
What it does:
 - Increases SNAP access for low-income college students
2. Support S. 1530 / H.R. 3115 – Universal School Meals Program Act of 2021
What it does:
 - Provides school breakfast and lunch at no charge to all children
 - Increases school breakfast and school lunch reimbursement rates to match the recommended rates of the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study (April 2019)

23 Addressing Benefits Cliffs: www.ncsl.org/research/human-services/addressing-benefits-cliffs.aspx

24 SNAP 2 Skills: <https://snaptoskills.fns.usda.gov/>

25 H.R. 1919, the Enhance Access to EATS Act: <https://gomez.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=2337>

- Provides free afterschool and summer meals and snacks to all children
- Expands summer Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) to all low-income children
- Provides up to three meals a day and a snack at no charge to children in child care
- Provides a 30-cent reimbursement for schools that procure local foods

Opportunities to Increase Food Security for At-risk Communities ●

Efforts should be made to address the barriers that exist in groups at higher risk for food insecurity. Nutrition plays a vital role in keeping seniors healthy. Access to adequate nutrition can reduce healthcare costs, and participation in congregate food programs can reduce loneliness and help seniors feel connected to the community. The programs that address senior nutrition are underutilized. Programs like Senior Congregate Meals, Meals on Wheels, and the Commodity Supplemental Food Program require increased visibility and, with more resources and outreach, could reach more food-insecure seniors across Utah.

Some immigrant communities face additional barriers in accessing food, both in the community and through federal nutrition programs. Proposed changes to immigration requirements in 2019, under the public charge rule,²⁶ had a detrimental effect on legal immigrants and mixed status household's willingness to apply for federal nutrition program benefits.²⁷ The stress that accessing these programs would impact their ability to stay in the U.S. discouraged many of these families from applying for programs for which they are eligible. Though the public charge rule has been rescinded, widespread misinformation and fear remain. An increase of resources are needed to address the food insecurity faced by these communities, including increased funding for trusted community organizations to address the health, well-being and immediate needs of these families.

Conclusions/Next Steps ●

Food insecurity is a persistent problem for far too many Utahns. The most recent data from the Economic Research Service reports one in 10 Utah households experience food insecurity. The solutions to address and reduce food insecurity span across the policy spectrum, and should be a

26 Public Charge: www.nilc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Public-Charge-What-Advocates-Need-to-Know-Now.pdf
27 <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/SNAP-Participation-Among-U.S.-Citizen-Children.pdf>

priority for every community across the state. Efforts to increase access to food need to address both the root causes of food insecurity and immediate access to food. Changes should be implemented at the local, state and federal level, from increasing the infrastructure of community food pantries to improving access to federal nutrition programs.

The creation of the Food Security Task Force through Senate Bill 141 Task Force on Food Security, is a first step to implementing lasting policy solutions that will increase access to food for all Utahns. To affect lasting change and to address the dynamic nature of the economy, the Governor’s Office, the Utah State Legislature and Utah’s Members of Congress should pledge to reduce and eliminate hunger and food insecurity in Utah through policy and funding recommendations that will help Utahns thrive.

Food Security Task Force Members ●

State Agencies

Thayne Mickelson	Emergency Manager	Dept. of Agriculture and Food
Michael Harris	EDI Officer	Dept. of Human Services
Lais Martinez	Director of Diversity and Equity	USHE
Kevin Burt	Assistant Deputy Director	DWS
Kate Wheeler	Child Nutrition Specialist	USBE
Janae Duncan	Division Director, Disease Control and Prevention	Dept. of Health
Dane Ishihara	Economic Development Analyst	GOED

Community Members

Susi Feltch-Malohifo’ou	Executive Director	Pacific Island to Knowledge
Rob Harter	Executive Director	Christian Center of Park City
Randy Olsen	Executive Director	Sanpete County Pantry
Ginette Bott	CEO	Utah Food Bank

Community Members Cont.

Belva Parr	Co-Chair of Women's Committee	Utah County Farm Bureau
Gina Cornia	Executive Director	Utahns Against Hunger
Aimee Winder Newton	Salt Lake County Council	Utah Association of Counties
Ken Leetham	North Salt Lake City Manager	Utah League of Cities and Towns
Sarah Elizabeth Garza-Levitt	Associate Director	U of U Center for Community Nutrition
Marti Woolford	Special Project Coordinator	Salt Lake County
Brian Emerson	Food and Equity Program Manager	Salt Lake City Sustainability Department
Juan Becerra	Manager Church Communication, Department Government and Community Relations team	Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints
Clayton Beckstead	Executive Director for the Miracle of Agriculture Foundation & Regional Manager	Utah Farm Bureau
Heidi LeBlanc	Director of Create Better Health (SNAP-Ed) program and the Hunger Solutions Institute (HSI)	Utah State University
Alexis Bucknam	Senior Network Director	United Way Salt Lake