

## 2017 SYMPOSIUM SERIES

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## FOOD SECURITY IN OUR COMMUNITY

A Portrait of the Omaha-Council Bluffs metro area  
with highlights from the March 22, 2017, Community Symposium

Food security refers to a household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food. In the Omaha-Council Bluffs metro area, it's a reality experienced by about 1 in 7 people across income levels.<sup>1</sup> The rising percentage of individuals who work, but can't make ends meet, means that the face of hunger may be the face of someone you know.

Limited access to healthy, affordable food is a contributing factor to food insecurity – but food alone won't solve the problem. Food insecurity and hunger are symptoms of complex and interconnected challenges. Health, safety, housing, academic attainment, and work performance are all related to adequate food consumption. The long-term impact of food insecurity and hunger is a cycle of instability, which makes it more difficult for adults and children to reach their full potential.

Local thought leaders across the Omaha-Council Bluffs multi-state metro area are taking a collaborative, holistic approach to addressing food insecurity and hunger. Several promising community initiatives draw upon focused, collective action across sectors to improve outcomes for families experiencing food insecurity. These efforts have improved access to healthy foods and increased food security among participating households.<sup>2</sup>

Together with partners across the community, United Way of the Midlands with support from the Iowa West Foundation is working to map food system needs and resources, and define opportunities and service gaps in order to align human and financial capital to advance promising strategies. Public, private and nonprofit professionals are participating in this collective effort - recognizing we all have a stake in keeping our community strong today, and for generations to come.

Special thanks to the thought leaders below for lending their insights and expertise at the March 22, 2017, Community Symposium on Food Insecurity.

- Moderator: Susan Ogborn, Food Bank for the Heartland
- Craig Howell, Hunger Collaborative
- Rachel Olive, Hunger Free Heartland
- Dr. Courtney Pinard, Gretchen Swanson Center for Nutrition
- Dr. Adi Pour, Douglas County Health Department

**Please mark your calendars for June 8,** when Anne Mosle from the Aspen Institute will discuss multi-generational poverty, and share strategies to break the cycle of poverty through shared responsibility and commitment. First National Bank Omaha and Nebraska Children and Families Foundation join the March symposium sponsors to bring this important topic to our attention.

# FOOD SECURITY IN OUR COMMUNITY

A Portrait of the Omaha-Council Bluffs metro area

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A strong community depends on an accessible and affordable food system for all people – one that provides services to meet current food needs and builds capacity to provide healthy food for generations to come. Yet, in the Omaha-Council Bluffs multi-state metro area, about 1 in 7 individuals experiences food insecurity because they lack reliable access to affordable, nutritious food.<sup>3</sup>

**Six out of 10 families with very low incomes in the Omaha-Council Bluffs area worry that food will run out before they can afford to purchase more.<sup>4</sup>**

“Food is not only essential to survive, it is part of our lived experience,” said Shawna Forsberg, President and Chief Executive Officer at United Way of the Midlands. “Important conversations build visibility and momentum for collective action to address this issue, and help give a voice to local families experiencing food insecurity.” Her comments draw on the collaborative spirit of United Way – the idea that we all have a stake in keeping our community strong.

That’s why United Way of the Midlands (UWM), in partnership with the Buffett Early Childhood Institute, University of Nebraska Medical Center and University of Nebraska Omaha, convened approximately 150 representatives from the business, nonprofit and public sectors for a community symposium on March 22, 2017. Local thought leaders from Food Bank for the Heartland, the Hunger Collaborative, Hunger Free Heartland, Gretchen Swanson Center for Nutrition and Douglas County Health Department, shared their insight, and deepened our collective knowledge about hunger and food security in our community. Highlights from recent local efforts demonstrated progress through collaboration, and illustrated the importance of public, private and nonprofit engagement in the ongoing effort to address food insecurity.

**Food insecurity:** a household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food.

**Hunger:** is an individual-level physiological condition that may result from food insecurity.

*Source: The Committee on National Statistics (CNSTAT) panel*

## **THE FACE OF HUNGER**

People throughout the Omaha-Council Bluffs metro area struggle daily to provide food for themselves and their families. In Douglas, Sarpy, and Pottawattamie counties more than 104,800 people experience limited or uncertain access to food.<sup>5</sup> This includes children, seniors, working adults and individuals in poverty, who are more likely to experience food insecurity and hunger across all three counties. In the Omaha-Council Bluffs metro area, the number of people experiencing low-income, poverty and deep poverty have all increased at rates significantly greater than national poverty rates from 2000-2014.<sup>6</sup> Even with strong social service networks and a vibrant business sector, individuals face significant barriers to food security across income levels.

Low food security is most concentrated among the poor, although, nationally, one-third of food-insecure households have annual incomes at least two times the federal poverty level (\$49,200). Research from the Brookings Institution indicates “food insecurity, often thought to be a characteristic of poverty, is actually dispersed widely over the income distribution.”<sup>7</sup> Nationally, 85 percent of food-insecure households with children are headed by adults who work.<sup>8</sup>

**In the Omaha-Council Bluffs area, 10% of families earning more than \$47,700 (for a family of 4) experience food insecurity.**<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, in the local metro area 36,583 people living in poverty work full or part time.<sup>10</sup> Even with a job, families struggle to make ends meet, as limited budgets create impossible choices. “This results in a variety of coping mechanisms,” said Dr. Courtney Pinard, Senior Research Scientist at Gretchen Swanson Center for Nutrition. Coping mechanisms may include rationing food among family members, and financial strategies such as borrowing money from payday lenders at interest rates up to 30 percent. Families may also employ trade-off strategies – opting to go without food or medicine to maintain their housing, utilities or other necessities. When households spend more than 30 percent of their income on housing, they are considered “housing burdened” and often must make difficult choices to maintain the roof over their heads. In Omaha, more than 50,520 households pay more than 30 percent of their income toward rent. Our neighbors may remain in their homes and still experience food insecurity. The full portrait of hunger in our community, and across the country, challenges perceptions that the condition is isolated among individuals in deep poverty.

**HBO’s “American Winter” captures stories of working families who find themselves experiencing food insecurity and struggling to make ends meet. View the impactful video shared at the March 22 symposium [here](#).**

Overall, food security within the Omaha-Council Bluffs multi-state metro region is consistent with rates across the country. However, a higher percentage of people here live in “food deserts” – low-income neighborhoods without ready access to healthy and affordable food.<sup>11</sup>

**9% (80,568) of individuals in the Omaha-Council Bluffs metro are living in a “food desert” compared to 4% nationally (13.6 million).**<sup>12</sup>

Adequate food access is further limited when parameters are narrowed to healthy options. Despite a vibrant agricultural landscape, much of the food available to residents in the midlands area has traveled hundreds of miles and may not be nutrient dense. In fact, about 140,000 people (17.4 percent) in the area struggle to find affordable, fresh produce.<sup>13</sup> The convenience of unhealthy food further deters consumption of nutritious food, and an overall healthy diet.





## **HEALTH, WORK, AND LIFE**

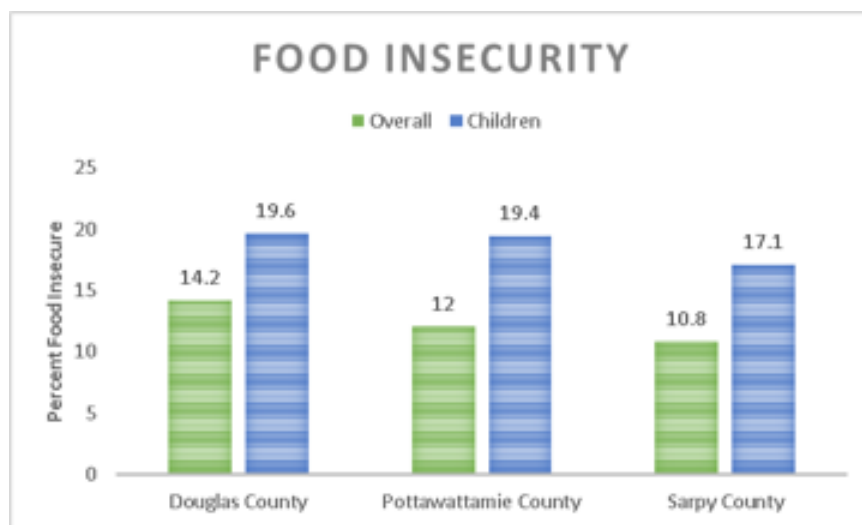
Access to healthy foods influences food security, and the general health of a community. “Food security is the number one influencer of health in the United States today,” said Dr. Adi Pour, Director of the Douglas County Health Department. “Nebraska is number 12 in the country in terms of health; we are never going to be the healthiest state unless we address food security.”

Health consequences of food insecurity include under-nutrition, developmental issues, cognitive delay, pregnancy complications, compromised psycho-social functioning, physical impairments, anxiety and depression, said Rachel Olive, Executive Director at Hunger Free Heartland.

<b>Health Concerns Related to Food Among Various Populations</b>		
<b>Children</b>	<b>Adults</b>	<b>Seniors</b>
Asthma Anemia Oral Health Behavioral Issues	Malnutrition Type II Diabetes Overweight and Obesity	Fewer calories and key nutrients Asthma Heart attack Congestive heart failure Depression
Sources: Lee, J., Gunderson, C., Cook, J., Laraia, B., and Johnson, M. (September 2012). Food Insecurity and Health across the Lifespan: Advances in Nutrition, 3(5): 744–745. <a href="https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3648765">https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3648765</a>  Feeding America. (2017). Child Development: The potential consequences of food insecurity for children. <a href="http://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/impact-of-hunger/child-hunger/child-development.html">http://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/impact-of-hunger/child-hunger/child-development.html</a>  Feeding America. (n.d). Spotlight on Senior Health: Adverse Health Outcomes of Food Insecure Older Americans. Retrieved from: <a href="http://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/our-research/senior-hunger-research/or-spotlight-on-senior-health-executive-summary.pdf">http://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/our-research/senior-hunger-research/or-spotlight-on-senior-health-executive-summary.pdf</a>		

Adults, children and seniors may experience other significant health conditions based on their age and food security. For instance, food insecure seniors are 53 percent more likely to report a heart attack, 52 percent more likely to develop asthma, and 40 percent more likely to report an experience of congestive heart failure.<sup>14</sup> These conditions often involve hospitalization, which costs more for a single day than feeding a single person for an entire year, Dr. Pour said.

“Food insecurity and hunger also affect work and school,” said Olive. “It’s difficult to function, learn, and reach our full potential if we don’t have the fuel we need.” This is particularly true for children, who experience food insecurity at a higher rate than the overall population.



Source: Feeding America's 2014 Food Insecurity Report

In addition to health impacts, food insecurity affects classroom readiness among youth. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention cites research indicating cognitive performance and classroom behavior are related to dietary behaviors. For instance, lack of adequate consumption of specific foods, such as fruits, vegetables or dairy products is associated with lower grades among students. A positive correlation between food and grades also exists, as “student participation in the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) School Breakfast Program (SBP) is associated with increased academic grades and standardized test scores, reduced absenteeism, and improved cognitive performance (e.g., memory).”<sup>15</sup> Children who experience food insecurity may be at higher risk for fighting, hyperactivity, aggression, anxiety, mood swings, bullying, truancy and school tardiness. Research suggests a hungry teen is also five times more likely to commit suicide.<sup>16</sup> Poor academic or professional performance may be a byproduct of hunger and food insecurity, while also perpetuating a cycle of instability across health, safety, housing, income and education domains.

“Hunger does not live in isolation from the other traumas of poverty,” said Craig Howell, Shared Services Coordinator at the Hunger Collaborative.

### **SHARED COMMITMENT AND A COLLABORATIVE COMMUNITY RESPONSE**

Local thought leaders across the Omaha-Council Bluffs multi-state metro area take a collaborative, holistic approach to addressing food security. Community initiatives have leveraged collaborative partnerships to improve access to healthy foods, and reduce food insecurity among clients.

“One approach that’s having local impact is creating an environment where the healthy choice is the easy choice,” said Dr. Pour. Local collaborations with neighborhood stores and farmers markets are some examples of this principle in action.

Neighborhood stores are teaming up with the Douglas County Health Department and local produce distributors to promote healthier options, such as fruits and vegetables, in areas where access supermarkets is limited. These neighborhood stores accept Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) supplemental food service vouchers. Participating stores also position fruit in checkout lanes or at key places to encourage healthy consumption. Initially, stores were resistant to carry low-fat milk, Dr. Pour said, but they sold out in a week. To discourage unhealthy behavior, the stores have even repositioned tobacco signs. Dr. Pour encouraged local residents to shop at these small, entrepreneurial stores to support socially-minded business practices, and reinforce the importance of healthy food access for residents.

**For a list of participating neighborhood stores and locations, click [here](#).**

**Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)** “offers nutrition assistance to millions of eligible, low-income individuals and families and provides economic benefits to communities. SNAP is the largest program in the domestic hunger safety net.”<sup>17</sup>

**The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)** “provides Federal grants to States for supplemental foods, health care referrals, and nutrition education for low-income pregnant, breastfeeding, and non-breastfeeding postpartum women, and to infants and children up to age five who are found to be at nutritional risk.”<sup>18</sup>

An increase in farmers markets throughout Douglas County also make healthy options more accessible, particularly since WIC and SNAP participants have some ability to use their assistance for qualified farmer’s market items. Charles Drew Health Center has made healthy choices even more convenient for its clients by facilitating a farmers market in its parking lot so clients can redeem vouchers for healthy options.

But food alone won’t solve hunger. Food insecurity and hunger are symptoms of complex and interconnected challenges. As such, Craig Howell said local organizations have intentionally avoided use of the term “food pantries” because it misrepresents the scope of work. “For instance, all hunger prevention programs on the 24th street corridor include an employment component,” Howell said.

Residents in this area of Omaha experience food insecurity at a greater rate than other parts of Douglas County, and have limited access to affordable healthy food options. The Omaha Plan initiative from 2014-2016 leveraged the resources of Conagra Brands, Food Bank for the Heartland, Hunger Collaborative, Omaha Public Schools, Douglas County Health Department, and Creighton University to surround families with critical services and improve food security. SNAP outreach, child nutrition programs, targeted referrals, breakfast in the classroom, neighborhood stores, and financial literacy education contributed to the positive impacts observed after three years.



The Omaha Plan initiative resulted in important progress. A repeated measures survey administered and analyzed by the Gretchen Swanson Center for Nutrition illustrated the following results among clients:

- The percentage of households with very low food security has decreased (from 41% to 33%)
- The percentage of households with high food security has increased (from 15% to 19%)<sup>19</sup>

**For more information about the Omaha Plan initiative click [here](#) and read Omaha World-Herald coverage [here](#).**

As a convener, educator and funder, United Way of the Midlands can mobilize a broad network of donors, advocates and volunteers to build on this momentum and accelerate progress for food security in the Omaha-Council Bluffs metro area. “When people work collaboratively it can really change things in a community,” said Dr. Pinard, drawing upon evidence from the Omaha Plan initiative. UWM’s investment approach also incorporates prevention and immediate intervention activities, with an initial collaborative goal to provide 48,000 healthy food services in 2017.

Furthermore, UWM’s broad investment portfolio recognizes an intersection between food and health, housing, safety, education and financial stability. Moving forward, efforts will draw upon UWM’s convening leadership to align resources and develop a long-term, collaborative response to the needs and opportunities identified through food resource mapping. “We are fortunate to have so many talented and committed people in this community who find hunger and food insecurity unacceptable and who are willing to pitch in and alleviate the situation,” said Susan Ogborn, President and CEO of Food Bank for the Heartland. The resource mapping project began in November 2016 with the support of the Iowa West Foundation, and includes more than 40 community partners from the public, private and nonprofit sectors

Ultimately, our goal is to remove barriers so all our neighbors can obtain stability and reach their full potential.

**United Way focuses the efforts of many to help our neighbors stand strong – by addressing basic needs, and fostering success in the classroom and the workplace**



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