

# WASHINGTON COUNTY FOOD SECURITY FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### **Introduction:**

The Vermont Campaign to End Childhood Hunger (VTCECH), through the Community Hunger, Assessment, Intervention and Resources (CHAIR) project with Northfield Savings Bank Foundation, conducted a focus group study from November 2006 through March 2008 to gather qualitative food security information from low-income households in Washington County.

### **Methodology:**

Five focus were groups convened in partnership with organizations that serve low-income households in Washington County. Four groups consisted of low-income parents with young children; the fifth group was made up of individuals with disabilities. In total, 37 individuals participated. An effort was made to include participants from both urban and rural communities in the county.

Through facilitated conversation, participants were asked a series of questions to provide information about household food practices, knowledge and assessment of federal and private nutrition assistance programs, and recommendations for improving the overall nutrition safety net for Washington County households.

### **Key Findings:**

#### **1. Access to Healthy Foods**

Focus group participants, across the board, expressed a strong desire to feed their families fresh, healthy foods. Lack of monetary resources was the biggest barrier to serving these foods. The majority of participants found themselves relying on cheap, high calorie, filling foods to feed their families, particularly towards the end of the month. Other barriers to providing nutritious foods included lack of transportation and cooking skills.

Very few participants felt that they had comprehensive and accurate information about where to turn to for help when money for food is tight. Only participants who work in human service organizations felt that they had good information about resources in their area.

#### **2. Experience with Federal Nutrition Programs**

Most participants had utilized one or more of the federal nutrition programs. Although these programs helped participants get by when money was tight, there were still many barriers facing families who wished to apply. These challenges included lengthy application processes, stigma and misunderstandings regarding eligibility. Participants also expressed a great deal of frustration with the unrealistic eligibility guidelines and what they felt were inadequate benefit amounts associated with the Food Stamp Program. None of the participations spoke of utilizing a summer food site in their community.

#### **3. Experience with Charitable Food Programs**

Most participants had utilized one or more of the private nutrition programs available in their community, with food shelves frequented the most. For the most part, participants

reported satisfactory experiences and felt comfortable accessing these resources. They did report struggling with the quality of food offered, finding transportation to the food shelf and accessing the sites during their limited hours of operation.

### **Key Recommendations:**

The following recommendations from focus group participants further reinforce the need for continued anti-hunger outreach and advocacy in Washington County and provide additional insight into opportunities for organizations, policy makers, and individuals to come together to strengthen the local nutrition safety net.

#### **1. Access to Healthy Foods:**

- Raise program eligibility guidelines to make them more realistic with the incomes of households that are in need of services
- More broadly promote Vermont 2-1-1 to provide comprehensive information on nutrition resources to low-income Vermonters
- Increase opportunities for nutrition education, both in the classroom and greater community
- Create and support programs that improve low-income Vermonters' access to fresh, healthy foods (farmers' markets that accept food stamps, farm to family coupons, reduced-price CSA shares, etc.)

#### **2. Federal Nutrition Programs:**

- Decrease the paperwork associated with federally funded nutrition assistance programs
- Improve the quality of school meals
- Lengthen the amount of time allotted for children to eat breakfast and lunch at school
- Raise food stamp benefit levels to more adequately reflect family food budgets and rising food costs
- Greatly increase number of summer food sites offered for low-income children

#### **3. Charitable Food Programs:**

- Improve quality of foods offered at food shelves, including more fresh fruits and vegetables, meats and milk
- Expand food shelf hours of operation to accommodate working households

### **Conclusion:**

The series of five focus groups held in Washington County represent an important part of VTCECH's larger effort to assess how low-income families in Vermont put food on the table. The information shared by participants reflects their strong desire to provide their families with nourishing food, and their frustration with a lack of resources to adequately do so. The participants spoke at length about their experiences with various nutrition assistance programs, providing a great deal of insight into issues of access and benefit adequacy. The information shared will be used to tell the stories of the struggles facing low-income Vermonters and to make improvements to current programs.

*Prepared in partnership between:*

