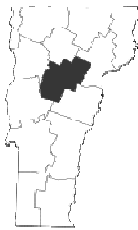


# WASHINGTON COUNTY FOOD SECURITY

## FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS



July 2008

Prepared through a Partnership between:



**Vermont Campaign to  
End Childhood Hunger**



**NORTHFIELD  
SAVINGS BANK**

## ABOUT VTCECH

The Vermont Campaign to End Childhood Hunger is a state wide nonprofit organization that combats hunger through advocacy, education and technical assistance – providing communities with the tools to create and sustain local nutrition programs that feed every child, every day.

To find out more or to sign up for VTCECH’s monthly food and nutrition e-update, visit [WWW.VTNOHUNGER.ORG](http://WWW.VTNOHUNGER.ORG)

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The Vermont Campaign to End Childhood Hunger, through the Community Hunger, Assessment, Interventions, and Resources (CHAIR) project with Northfield Savings Bank Foundation, conducted a focus group study to gather qualitative food security data from low-income households in Washington County. The information gathered by the study will be used to build upon existing regional food security data to better inform the work of the Vermont Campaign to End Childhood Hunger and its partners to further strengthen the nutrition safety net for low-income families in Washington County. VTCECH plans to utilize the report to raise awareness among the general population, offer policy recommendations, and facilitate the implementation of best practices.

The focus group study is a critical piece of the CHAIR project which promotes a comprehensive, community-centered approach to building a strong nutrition safety net for Vermonters in need. With current pilots in Washington and Chittenden counties, the project addresses hunger by educating community members about the local causes and effects of hunger and providing both the tools and technical assistance to improve nutrition and reduce hunger in individual communities. CHAIR strengthens existing working relationships and develops new partnerships with organizations serving low-income and food-insecure families. To accurately assess and improve gaps in services, it is especially important to hear from those struggling with the issue each day and incorporate their ideas into the array of solutions.

This report describes the findings of the focus group study that was conducted between November 2006 and March 2008.

As with all qualitative research, the findings are to be viewed as suggestive rather than definitive. Because the participants are not randomly selected and the sample sizes are small, the results can not be generalized to the entire population of Washington County residents.

## STUDY DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

The design for the focus group study consisted of five focus groups; four targeted at low-income households with young children and one consisting of households with people with disabilities. Low-income was defined as below 200% of the federal poverty level.

In total, 37 individuals participated in the five focus groups. The majority (30 out of 37) of participants were parents of young children and the remaining 7 participants live in households which include people with disabilities. There was broad geographic representation, including participants from urban and rural settings.

Host organizations were used to recruit participants for each focus group. The Vermont Campaign to End Childhood Hunger identified prospective hosts from organizations that work with low-income families and serve households from throughout the county. Host organizations screened prospective participants using a tool developed by the consultant to ensure that all participants met specific criteria for each group. Participants were paid a \$40 stipend as compensation for their time and travel costs. In addition, free childcare was provided at each focus group site to make participation easier.

One of the Washington County focus groups was composed entirely of individuals with disabilities. The nature of the disabilities that participants faced varied widely - heart attack, diabetes, visually impaired, learning disabilities, mental and emotional disabilities, neurological disorders, chronic pain, paralysis, memory loss, headaches, epilepsy, and Crohn's disease.

### **Focus Group Composition**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Organization</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>No. of participants</b>
11-30-2006	Twinfield High School	Marshfield	6
12-13-2006	WIC	Barre	1*
02-27-2007	Highgate Housing	Barre	11
07-16-2007	Vermont Center for Independent Living	Montpelier	7
03-19-2008	Washington County Family Center	Montpelier	12

*\* Unfortunately, this focus group had very poor attendance compared to the number of registered participants, but both the consultant and facilitator decided to move forward with the questions for the one individual that was present.*

The study was designed to provide information about the following research questions:

1. What are low-income Vermont families doing to put food on the table? What are these families doing to put food on the table when there is little or no money for food?
2. Are the available resources enough to provide food for the household through the month at the quality and quantity they find acceptable?
3. What is their experience with each aspect of the various federal assistance programs? (food stamps, WIC, school meals, summer food, CSFP)
4. What is their experience with the various private nutrition assistance programs? (food shelves, community meals)
5. Are there programs they know about but don't use?
6. What would they recommend to make any of the existing public or private nutrition assistance programs better?
7. If they could design or invent a new nutrition assistance program, what would it be?
8. Additional Research questions for households with disabled individuals:
  - How does having a disability affect the ability to shop for and prepare meals?
  - What are the barriers to accessing nutrition resources for low-income families with a disabled member?
  - Are there gaps in service regarding nutrition assistance for people with disabilities?
  - How responsive are service providers and agencies to the needs of individuals with disabilities?
  - How adequate and flexible is the response of federal programs to individuals with specific dietary needs?

A discussion guide was developed to further develop the research questions and incorporate them into a script for the focus groups. (*See Appendix*) The focus group sessions were tape recorded, with permission from the participants, and transcribed verbatim for use in analyzing the findings.

## FINDINGS

### **FOOD QUALITY AND QUANTITY:**

#### **How do low-income families in Washington County decide what to serve on a given night?**

Most common factors in decision making process: food available given the time of the month and proximity to payday, preparation time, what children will eat and level of cooking skill.

Although participants had varying degrees knowledge of nutrition and cooking, they all reported a strong desire to feed their families well balanced meals, including a protein, vegetable and a starch.

***Time of the month/proximity to payday:*** Most participants reported a significant reduction in the quality of meals at the end of the month or close to payday. These meals include a heavier reliance on starch, including cheap, filling foods such as ramen noodles and macaroni and cheese. They also reported being able to serve significantly fewer amounts of fruits and vegetables.

- *“In the beginning of the month we have more variety of food and at the end of the month we just throw together whatever we have left over. I try to make it healthy – sometimes it is, sometimes it isn’t.”*
- *They [my kids] don’t like junk food. They like healthy things for snacks so it’s a little expensive. They don’t want the dollar Debbie snacks, stuff like that. They want grapes and apples and stuff that’s very expensive – especially when I buy it on Monday and by Friday half of it’s no good in the fridge and I have to just buy it again.”*
- *“Our standbys are usually a lot of pasta - things like spaghetti or tuna casserole...things that are fairly quick and easy...nothing that’s going to go bad.”*
- *“Christmas is the hardest for us. The month after I’ve got two birthdays a day apart. We finally decided this year we are giving up Christmas because it’s just too much.”*

***Preparation time:*** Most focus group participants were mothers balancing work and/or school, childcare and other responsibilities, making time a limiting factor in deciding what to cook. On busy evenings, families report relying on convenience food such as hot dogs, macaroni and cheese, french fries and ramen noodles. Families reported using the extra time available to them on weekends to cook.

- *“For me it depends – If I have a busy plan in the evening, it will be a quick thing. That’s generally whatever is in the refrigerator. She likes Ramen Noodles. She can cook it herself, but some nights that’s all she eats is just the noodles.”*

- *“I usually cook whatever we have. You know money is really, really tight and prices are going up. Usually by Friday I’m exhausted so it’s a quick meal.”*

**What children will eat:** Participants spoke of the difficulty that arises from accommodating the food preferences of their children and significant others, as well as special health needs. Due to monetary constraints, participants report relying on the foods that they know their kids will eat/like, rather than experimenting with new foods or recipes. For some, their children love to eat a variety of foods. For others, their children will adhere only to a very limited diet.

- *“Gabriel doesn’t eat anything that I eat pretty much. He’s just not interested in the same kind of foods. I have to cook two meals, so...they’re usually pretty quick meals. The food he eats is worse than the food I eat. It’s like macaroni and cheese, chicken nuggets. He’d be perfectly happy eating potato chips, but can I get him to eat broccoli? Never.”*
- *“People tell me I live out of a can too much but I have a 13 year old who won’t eat vegetables at all.”*

**Cooking skills:** Most participants reported frustration over their lack of cooking skills, wishing they knew how to “cook a real meal,” or a “meal from scratch.”

A significant minority of participants reported a strong interest in “healthy/organic/local” foods and frustration over their inability to afford them.

- *“What I’ve found is that we used to be able to afford organic foods and healthier food – fish twice a week- the healthy balanced diet. But because of oil prices we can’t anymore and we’ve had to revert back to macaroni and cheese and hot dogs and chicken nuggets, it’s cheaper.... I do feel like we can’t afford to buy the healthier foods.”*

**Are there foods that low-income families in Washington County wish they could serve their families that they don’t or can’t?**

The most persistent theme that emerged was participants’ desire to feed their family more fresh fruits and vegetables.

- *“I would like to have more fresh vegetables and stuff. They are more expensive. I don’t have a way to the grocery store every couple of days because they go bad. Canned stuff is just disgusting and we only have so much freezer room.”*
- *“Fruits are more expensive than if you would buy 10 little candy bars. The oranges – you only get one orange for 99 cents and my kids love it, but that’s too much to buy 5 or 6 of them.”*
- *“It’s astronomical to feed your family well and yet you kind of know you’re paying the consequence.”*

- *“Fruits and vegetables. The whole economy is trying to teach you to eat healthy foods. It’s impossible, but it’s the biggest thing that they don’t help you with. The cost has gone through the roof. A tomato is what, \$3 plus?”*

Some participants spoke of a desire to feed their families more fish, as it is seen as a healthier source of protein.

- *“I bought three swordfish steaks the other day and it was over \$20.00.”*

Many participants expressed frustration at not being able to feed their families treats or special foods, such as steak for a special occasion or snack foods for their children.

Participants reported cost as being the most limiting factor in their decisions about what to serve their families.

- *“All three of the kids love salad and we very rarely get to have it because it costs \$20 to get all of the salad ingredients. It’s not something I have \$20 to spend on, when I can spend \$20 to get 5 or 10 boxed meals.”*

### **How do cost and meal routines change for low-income families in Washington County during the summer?**

Whether or not participants felt that their food costs increased during the summer varied widely. Many participants reported feeling the strain of having to provide their children with breakfast and lunch when school is not in session. Parents also expressed frustration over the cost of having to feed their children’s friends and/or neighbors during the summer.

- *“It’s the same on vacations, I have to feed her breakfast and lunch now and with school I only have to feed her dinner and a snack. Summertime, I have whole weeks during vacation that I have to buy all three meals and snacks so it’s a little more pricey.”*
- *“Mine is home all the time and she has her friends over. In the summer we have to provide more food especially because she’s more energetic, so it’s not like breakfast, lunch and dinner, it’s like breakfast, snack, lunch, snack, supper, snack...it’s like she’s eating all the time.”*
- *“My kids eat 24/7. I need to padlock the cupboards. The grocery bill goes up an extra \$200 when the kids are home on [summer] vacation.”*
- *“My house is kids central in the summer. I’ve had up to 10 kids at sleepovers – they never go away. It’s really hard in the summer at my house.”*

Some participants reported a slight reduction in costs during the summer. This was attributed to family members eating less/lighter in the summer, the ability to grill/cook meals with friends, gardening, cheaper produce and less regular meal times, etc.

- *“For us we definitely have it easier in the summer because we eat a lot lighter.”*
- *“We eat a lot of corn. It’s really cheap in the summer.”*
- *“When I can buy from a farmer that I know my food costs are a lot lower. Then I’m shocked when I have to go back to the grocery store for vegetables and how much they cost there.”*

Costs were relatively static for participants whose children are in daycare or at home year-round.

None of the participants reported that their children obtain meals through a summer school, recreation program, or community site that provides free meals through the federally funded Summer Food Service program.

## **ACCESSING FOOD RESOURCES:**

### ***Where do low-income families in Washington County typically shop for food?***

Participants reported price as the primary factor in deciding where to shop for food. Other factors include comfort/familiarity with a given store, the availability of transportation, quality of produce/meat based on past experiences, volume of shoppers

- *“Basically anywhere in Vermont you find a store that you go to and after a while you notice the prices jump. You’re asking this much for this type of meat? I can’t afford that on food stamps or whatever.”*
- *“If I could only shop at the co-op, I would, but I can’t afford it.”*
- *“If I only have to pick up a few things, I’m not going to travel for it. I’ll spend more on gas than I would save.”*

*Additional places that participants acquire food:* local markets, Costco, Outlet stores, farmers’ market, Walmart, farm, dollar stores. [in order of frequency mentioned]

Most focus group participants shop at one of the three major grocery chain stores: Price Chopper, Shaw’s and Hannaford’s.

### **How often do low-income families in Washington County shop for food?**

The number of times participants shop for food in a given month varied widely. Despite this, it was clear though that almost every participant adhered to a deliberate and well planned shopping routine. The biggest factor in determining this routine was their income schedule. Depending on when they get paid, some people shop once a week, others shop once a month.

- *“We don’t get food stamps so we go every Friday after our paycheck comes in.”*

- *“The reason I do the two weeks in advance is a finance thing. When I go shopping everything looks good – so I plan out my meals, so that helps.”*
- *“When I was working full time, I’d go once a month because I could afford to and then just stock up on everything like pastas and canned foods, but I can’t afford to now because we just barely stretch it week to week.”*
- *“We need to go grocery shopping usually once a week but most of the time it’s once a month, maybe once every other month. I feel guilty whenever I ask my mom if I can get some money to go grocery shopping. Because otherwise, I mean, I don’t have the money...I just don’t have it. Between childcare and house payments, insurance, there’s not enough money with paying those bills.”*

Other factors that determined how often participants shop: location of sales, availability of transportation, ability to take kids along, time available (sometimes families have to shop at the closest store, not the cheapest, due to time constraints).

Participants were very skilled in knowing when they are likely to find the lowest prices and try to route their shopping around those times. For example, the “manager’s special,” first thing in the morning at Shaw’s. In every focus group, at least one participant reported a belief that grocery stores raise their prices in the beginning of the month because that is when families typically have the most money. Most of the sales occur mid-month.

### **How do families in Washington County stretch their food budget?**

Families put a lot of effort into stretching their budget at the grocery store and at home. They also rely on free or supplemental sources of food to make it through the month.

*Stretching their food budget at the grocery store:* monitor sale flyers, budget tightly, utilize coupons, purchase store brands, stick to a grocery list, cheap foods. A small number of families report shopping in bulk or buying directly from farmers/butchers to cut costs.

*Stretching their food budget at home:* In every group, several participants reported skipping meals or reducing portion sizes so that their children have enough to eat. Many families also reported cutting back on quantity and quality to conserve resources. This includes preparing limited lunches and/or mothers skipping/reducing meals altogether.

*Other methods include:* hiding snacks or fruit from children to help make food last longer, getting “creative” with meals, combining whatever they have left in the house into casseroles and eating all leftovers.

- *“I buy lots of soup and crackers, so when we get low I can butter the crackers and they can dunk them in their soup or I buy extra bread and cheese so I can make tomato soup and grilled cheese and they get filled with that.”*
- *“Sometimes we eat macaroni and cheese, soup, stuff like that. 69 cents a pack of pasta.”*

- *“There have definitely been days when I have not eaten so that my kids can have the milk or the bread. As sad as it sounds, it’s true.”*
- *“That’s what I do at supper time – let them [the kids] have more than me.”*
- *“Ramen noodles. They like Ramen Noodles and they are cheap.”*

Quite a few participants mentioned gardening, but more as a hobby or supplement – something they do with their children. It helps them with fresh produce but is not their main source of sustenance.

*Stretching their food budget through supplemental assistance:* Many families spoke of visiting a food shelf or food drop, attending community meals and relying on friends/family for money or meals. Although most families have children who receive free/reduced breakfast and lunch, only a few families mentioned it as a way that they save money.

### **Why is it difficult for low-income families in Washington County to put food on the table?**

According to participants, cost of living and lack of transportation are the biggest barriers for low-income families in Washington County. Participants felt that it is very difficult for residents of Central Vermont to find employment that provides a livable wage. Those who live in rural areas must travel a significant distance to access resources – this is particularly challenging to manage with the rising costs of food and fuel.

- *“Everything else has got to get paid first. The mortgage gets paid first, the car payment, the heat, the electric, telephone, day care...insurances, all of that has to get taken care of first. Food is the last thing that gets paid for if there’s any money left over and if there’s not, that’s what I cut out.”*
- *When the gas went up and prices went up on everything, even newspapers, the wage requirements for all of those programs didn’t change and yet everyone’s struggling more. Nobody got a raise that I know of.”*

*Additional barriers reported:* Lack of time or knowledge of how to cook, picky eating, and unrealistic income limits associated with assistance programs

Some participants contributed ideas for new nutrition/economic assistance programs. These ideas include: grocery delivery, additional discount stores, more public transportation, healthcare, help paying car insurance, more publicity surrounding existing nutrition assistance programs.

It is worth noting that many participants simply wished that their town contained a supermarket.

## **What challenges do low-income individuals with disabilities in Washington County face in trying to put food on the table?**

Disabled participants reported facing many of the same challenges that other focus group participants encountered, including difficulty affording healthy food and lack of nutrition knowledge/cooking skills.

- *“I’m not supposed to eat food out of a can because of the high sodium content, but that’s all I can afford.”*

Challenges specific to their disability include difficulty or inability to stand to cook, difficulty walking downstairs to get meals that are delivered, inability to reach supermarkets that are not on a bus route and accessibility issues in stores (scooters, etc).

- *“I can’t go to the store as often as I would like because there’s no one to take me.”*

Many of the participants rely on sources outside of the home for food: senior meal sites, soup kitchens, meals on wheels.

Participants spoke a lot about the lack of resources to accommodate special dietary needs and the difficulty of having to plan their entire day around their mobility.

- *“It can take 3 hours to get back and forth from the food shelf. For outdated food, it’s not worth it.”*

Participants expressed frustration at not feeling like benefit programs really evaluate their individual situation/circumstances, rather than simply following one overarching rule for everybody. They expressed a desire for improved and specialized case management. What works for everyone else, doesn’t necessarily work for them.

## **Where can families in Washington County turn to for help when money for food is tight?:**

*Participants named a variety of sources for nutrition assistance in their community: food shelf, food drops, Salvation Army, churches for community meals, Central Vermont Community Action Agency (CVCAC) and Community Emergency Relief Volunteers (CERV) in Northfield.*

The majority of participants do not feel that they have good/complete information about where to turn to for help. Many reported learning about nutrition resources from friends or neighbors.

WIC was mentioned several times as a program that helps connect families to other benefits for which they may be eligible. Those who work for social service agencies, such

as CVCAC also had a better handle on available resources than other participants. During the focus group, many participants learned of certain assistance programs for the first time.

- *“They don’t really advertise in Marshfield. I live right across from it. They had free winter stuff, clothes and stuff. I had no idea until I went up the street and saw the sign and it was almost over with. The food drop too. They had one down there and I knew nothing about it until it was done.”*
- *“I’ve seen some sign, like I know a sign that I go by once in a while in Plainfield for spaghetti dinner or something.”*
- *“I just heard people name like 10 food shelves that I’ve never heard of.”*
- *“Do you know how many food shelves you could hit in a month? I don’t know the rules.”*
- *“The only way I found out about the food shelf was my neighbor told me. It’s once you whine and whine and whine, ‘we have no money,’ then you hear – ‘by the way, you can go down there’ – otherwise, I never would have known.” People know that I’ve been out of work sick for several months and we are struggling very bad financially but no one seems to let us know about these secret resources out there.”*

## **ACCESS TO FEDERAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS**

### **What are the experiences of low-income families in Washington County with the Food Stamp Program?**

The majority of focus group participants have had some experience with the Food Stamp Program. They are either current recipients, have received food stamps in the past or applied but were denied benefits.

Program feedback centered on three categories: eligibility, the application process, benefits levels.

***Eligibility:*** Many recipients reported frustration with Food Stamp Program income guidelines. Despite a high degree of need, many families found themselves \$3 or \$5 over the income limit and therefore unable to receive assistance.

***Application Process:*** About twenty-five percent of focus group participants reported having difficulty during the application process, most frequently regarding communication with their caseworker. Quite a few participants spoke of feeling disrespected or belittled during their visit to the food stamp office. Other issues include difficulty filling out the food stamp application and the time it takes to gather paperwork for documentation.

- *“Sitting there watching them stand there, hand against the door casing, drinking coffee, soda or whatnot and your appointments was 15 minutes ago.”*

- *“I just got a new worker for my food stamps. I went in for my appointment and she never even once looked at me. I asked her a question and she said she’d look into that at some other time, ‘I don’t have time right now.’ Flipped through the pages and off she went.”*
- *“There was a glitch in the computer and for some reason at the beginning of the month I didn’t have food stamps and I didn’t know if I was going to. I got, ‘We’re understaffed, I can’t help you, we’ll get to you when we get to you,’ then we had the snow storm. I mean we just went three weeks without food because of a glitch in the computer.”*
- *“Just the application – not that hard, but I have to go and get my landlord to sign something and my boss to sign something and my college to sign something and please; it’s a little bit much for \$50 a month in food.”*

**Allotment levels:** Participants spoke of frustration with their lack of understanding of how food stamp allotments are determined, feeling like there’s “no rhyme or reason” to benefit levels.

- *“He went from going hourly to foot pay so he was going to be bringing home approximately \$100.00 more gross – but they also upped his child support \$50.00 and that dropped our food stamps \$150.00. So we ended up \$50 in the hole actually and it made it worse.”*
- *“Well if I’m going to go to work and they take all of my benefits away, Medicaid, everything, what’s the sense? We aren’t able to live on nothing.”*

Participants were asked to provide feedback on how the Food Stamp Program can be improved. Their recommendations include:

- Increasing the adequacy of benefits
- Expanding eligibility
- Reducing paperwork
- Publicizing phone interview option
- Improving customer service
- Amending FSP rules to allow applicants who are under the age of 22, have a child and are staying with their parents to apply as a their own food stamp household.

### **What are the experiences of low-income families in Washington County with the School Breakfast Program?**

The majority of participants reported that their children typically eat breakfast at school, taking advantage of the free/reduced price federal meal program. Overall they spoke of satisfaction with the program and the application process.

- *“My kids love it. They tell me what they have. I’ve got three kids that get it.”*

Parents had few complaints about the quality of breakfast served. Some reported a desire

to see more variety on the menu or the availability of healthier food choices. Quality seemed to vary widely from school to school.

Quite a few parents expressed frustration regarding the short amount of time that their children are given to eat.

- *“I think if they were more flexible on the time because its 8:30 on the dot. If you walk in there at 8:29, they’re probably not going to give you breakfast.”*

### **What are the experiences of low-income families in Washington County with the School Lunch Program?**

The majority of participants reported that their children typically eat lunch at school, taking advantage of the free/reduced price federal meal program. Overall they spoke of satisfaction with the program and the application process. A few of the participants felt that some of the questions on the application were too intrusive.

- *“It’s healthier than I thought it would be. I think I remember when I went to school, it wasn’t that healthy.”*

Many participants spoke about the vast improvements to school meal programs that have taken place since they were in school. They are happy that the use of computers and student ID number have made it virtually impossible to tell which children receive free/reduced price meals, reducing program stigma dramatically.

Quality and time allotted for lunch varied widely from school to school. Some students appear to be very unhappy with the foods offered as a part of their school lunch program. Parents expressed frustration over a la carte items that must be purchased separately, at full price. In some cases these items are the healthiest – salad bar, sandwiches, etc.

- *“I don’t have a problem technically with the school lunch; I think it’s the time that they have to eat lunch. They get 15-20 minutes to eat and if they get into socializing, they can’t eat their lunch.”*
- *“At Twinfield it’s K-12 so I mean, your youngest kids are starting to eat at 9:30 or 10 in the am and your high schoolers aren’t eating until 1 in the afternoon.”*
- *“My oldest daughter was eating lunch at 11 and by the time she gets home, she’s starving.”*
- *“Most of the time they come home hungry. They don’t like the lunch; they say it’s nasty dried up lasagna, the same old thing.”*
- *“My daughter is a vegetarian and she has complained for years that the only other option is PB & J. It’s not fair. She eats PB&J every day.”*

Participants were asked to provide feedback on how school meal programs can be improved. Their recommendations include:

- Lengthening lunch times
- Improving food quality
- Increasing variety
- Providing more vegetarian options

Some participants whose children are not yet in school provided feedback on the free meals provided to their children in day care as a part of the Child and Adult Care Food Program. Those who have children receiving these meals were appreciative of the quality and variety of foods offered.

- *“The food my sons eat here is great. They make sure it’s all healthy and 90% of its organic.”*
- *“Brandon’s been exposed to a lot of different foods that he wouldn’t have tried at my house because he doesn’t eat a lot of variety of things so I didn’t think to make it. Now that he’s tried it here I know to make it at home and he’ll eat it at home.”*

### **What are the experiences of low-income families in Washington County with the Women, Infants and Children Program (WIC)?**

Almost all of the focus group participants currently participate in the WIC program or have in the past. Overall participants reported a great deal of appreciation for WIC, with very few complaints. Participants spoke at length about the importance of the food they received and reported being treated with respect at the office. They also appreciated the Farm to Family coupons available to WIC participants, which can be used to obtain fresh produce at farmer’s markets.

How participants responded to the question of vouchers vs. home delivery varied widely. Some felt that they would prefer to choose their own foods, others are very thankful for routine delivery – this was particularly evident among those who lack consistent access to transportation. Those who would prefer vouchers reported getting tired of receiving the same foods over and over again. Some participants spoke of struggling with food being stolen or the hassle of remembering to put out a cooler with ice in the summer.

- *“Delivery is great. It’s wonderful because I just don’t have the time and I do not want to bring my three kids to a grocery store.”*

Participants were asked to provide feedback on how WIC can be improved. Their recommendations include:

- Include a greater variety of cereals in the WIC package
- Extend the age of eligibility for children
- Include fruits and vegetables in the WIC package
- Allow for more substitutions of food to accommodate special dietary needs

## ACCESS TO CHARITABLE FOOD ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

### **What are the experiences of low-income families in Washington County with community meals?**

About a third of focus group participants reported attending a community meal at least once. Although a few participants attend meals regularly, none reported them as a form of nutrition assistance that they depend on regularly.

Those who have attended community meals reported difficulty accommodating family members with special dietary needs. For example, diabetics can eat only small amounts of the foods offered as starches typically provide the foundation of the meal.

The few participants who attend community meals regularly remarked on their importance as a way to socialize and connect with other area families.

Quite a few participants expressed reluctance to attend community meals at the Salvation Army in Barre because of its religious affiliation.

### ***What are the experiences of low-income families in Washington County with food shelves?***

Most participants have used a food shelf at least once. This is a particularly important resource towards the end of the month when their food budget is the tightest and other forms of nutrition assistance have been used.

Those who have used food shelves spoke of the friendliness of volunteers and their gratitude for the respect that they are shown.

- *“I always found the people there to be very friendly and very respectful. I just wish they paid for a little bit better quality.”*

Most participants reported frustration regarding food quality – lack of variety, outdated food, junk food, etc. Participants mentioned the quality of the food drops as being irregular.

- *“No meat though, a lot of junk food I’ve seen. I went through once and it was all junk food. Juices, candy, cake, pies. No meat.”*
- *“Some of the food you get they get from the food bank and it’s outdated so then you really don’t know if you want to eat it or not.”*
- *“My kids love it because it’s stuff that I’d never buy, like doughnuts, muffins, cookies.”*
- *“More useful things there – like why do you need cream of mushroom soup? It’s just they have stuff there like marinade. I’m grateful for what I get but how are you going to marinate nothing?”*

Many participants also expressed frustration with food shelf hours of operation. It is particularly difficult for those without regular access to transportation to make the visit.

- *“I know they are on Wednesdays – you’ve got 4 hours to get there. For me it was craziness. I missed a few months when we really needed it, I could have gone but it’s one day a week.”*
- *“I can usually find a ride but for some reason it’s only on Tuesdays and they are closed on Tuesday and Thursday. And then there are weird hours when they are open and closed two hours for lunch. We’ve gotten rides and gotten there and they are closed.”*
- *“People have to work. Or some can’t find transportation. It was so frustrating to me because we needed food so desperately but it was at the one time when I didn’t have a choice. A couple of times I went into work late and got in trouble.”*

Participants were asked to provide feedback on how food shelves in their area can be improved. Their recommendations include:

- Expand hours of operation
- Offer more healthy grains, fresh fruits and veggies and meat – all that’s not outdated, healthy cereals, milk
- Provide recipes for how to cook some of the foods offered
- Publicize location and hours of food shelves
- Reduce/remove limits on visits

## **SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS**

### **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 find themselves relying on cheap, high calorie, filling foods to feed their families, particularly towards the end of the month and during the summer. Other barriers to providing nutritious foods include 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. Service providers were the only subgroup who felt that they have good information about resources in their area.

### **EXPERIENCE WITH FEDERAL NUTRITION PROGRAMS**

Most participants have utilized one or more of the federal nutrition programs. Although these programs help participants get by when money is tight, there are still many barriers facing families who wish to apply. These challenges include lengthy application processes, stigma and misunderstandings regarding eligibility. Participants also expressed a great deal of frustration with the unrealistic eligibility guidelines and inadequate benefit amounts associated with the Food Stamp Program. None of the participations spoke of utilizing a summer food site in their community. The participants did, however, have many positive things to say about school meal programs. Although they offered suggestions for how the programs can be improved, most spoke positively about food quality, the ease of paperwork and the anonymity provided to children receiving free or reduced price meals.

### **EXPERIENCE WITH PRIVATE NUTRITION PROGRAMS.**

Most participants have 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.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the feedback provided by focus group participants, the following recommendations are offered as ways to improve the quality of and access to both private and federally funded nutrition assistance programs for low-income Vermonters:

### **ACCESS TO HEALTHY FOODS**

- Redefine “poverty” and raise eligibility guidelines to make them more realistic
- 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 the access of low-income Vermonters to fresh, healthy foods (farmers’ market/EBT, farm to family coupons, reduced price CSA shares, etc)

### **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
- Create a more welcoming environment at the food stamp office for applicants by improving customer service
- Increase variety and selection of foods available in WIC package
- Greatly increase number of summer food sites offered for low-income children

### **PRIVATE NUTRITION PROGRAMS:**

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

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The series of five focus groups held in Washington County represent an important part of VTCECH’s larger effort to seek information about how low-income families in Vermont put food on the table. The information shared by participants reflected their strong desire to feed their families and their frustration with a lack of resources to adequately do so. The participants spoke at great length about their experiences with both public and private 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 and services.

## APPENDIX:

### **Discussion Questions**

The following discussion questions were used as the framework for focus group facilitation. Each question was given a priority level (Low, Medium, High) in order to guide the conversation during a limited timeframe.

#### **Introductions**

Let's start by introducing ourselves. Why don't we go around the table and each say a little bit about ourselves.

Can you tell us your first name or name you like to be called by, where you live, the ages of your children, and who else lives in your household?

**Let's start by talking about the kind of food that your family eats and what mealtime looks like at your house.**

1. What does a typical evening meal look like for your family? What do you usually serve for dinner? [**Medium**]
2. How do you decide what to serve on a given night? [**High**]

*Probes:*

- *Amount of time for preparation?*
- *Convenience?*
- *What's on hand?*
- *What I can afford?*
- *What the kids like?*
- *Who's home for dinner?*

3. Is there anything that you would like to serve to your family that you don't – or maybe don't serve them on a regular basis? [**High**]

What gets in the way of your serving those things?

*Probes:*

- *Can't afford it*
- *No one will eat it?*
- *Can't get to store on regular basis?*

4. When you or your family doesn't eat a meal at home – breakfast, lunch or dinner- where do you eat? [**Low**]

*Probes:*

- *School?*
- *Fast food/restaurants/convenience stores?*
- *Family or friends?*

Are there times when you or your kids skip meals? When ?

*Probes:*

- *No time, too busy?*
- *End of the month?*
- *No food in the house?*
- *Don't like what's in the house?*
- *No money?*

**Now I'd like to ask you some questions about how you buy food for your family.**

5. Though most families shop for food at a number of places, can you tell me about where you usually shop for food? [**Medium**]

*Probes:*

- *Grocery store?*
- *Discount food outlet?*
- *Mom 'n Pop Store or Convenience Store*
- *Farmer's market?*

6. Take a minute to think about what affects where you shop? [**High**]

*Probes:*

- *Prices?*
- *Coupons?*
- *Distance/Convenience?*
- *Transportation?*
- *Accept Food Stamps?*

(7) Except for picking up items like bread and milk, how often do you go shopping for groceries? [**High**]

*Probes:*

- *Couple times a month?*
- *Weekly?*

- *Almost daily?*

8. What affects how often you shop? [**Low**]

*Probes:*

- *How far do you have to travel to get to the store?*
- *How do you get to the store?*
- *How close it is to end of month or paycheck?*

**Let's spend some time talking about how you stretch your food dollars and what you do to feed your family when things are tight.**

9. Take a minute to think about the things you do to save money on food or to stretch your food money? [**High**]

*Probes:*

- *Coupons?*
- *buying in bulk?*
- *Hunting?*
- *Garden?*
- *look for bargains?*
- *eat with friends of family?*
- *food stamps?*
- *food shelf?*
- *Budget?*

10. Do your meals change towards the end of the month or close to payday? If yes, how do they change? [**High**]

If you cut back, what do you cut back on? How do you cut back?

*Probes:*

- *change what you buy and serve – or how much you buy and serve?*
- *give up other things?*
- *put off other bills or expenses?*

11. Where can people in Washington County turn for help feeding their families when money for food is tight? [**High**]

*Probes:*

- *Family?*
- *Friends?*
- *Church?*

- *food shelf?*
- *community meals – how was this experience?*
- *Other?*

Are there places you are aware of but don't use? Why?

You've named several places you can turn. Do you think that you have good information about where to turn in your community when you need help feeding your family?

**Food Stamps have been mentioned by a number of you as a way to stretch your money for food. I'd like to ask you some questions about your experience with the Food Stamp Program.**

12. How many of you have used food stamps? (Show of hands) If you don't use food stamps now – or if you've never used food stamps – why is that? **[High]**

*Probes:*

- *Not Eligible?*
- *Eligibility or Recertification Process?*
- *Hassle?*
- *Don't want charity?*
- *Attitude of intake workers/not treated respectfully?*
- *Food stamps not accepted where you shop?*

13. Whether or not you've used food stamps, can you think of things that would make the Food Stamp Program better or more "user-friendly"? **[High]**

*Probes:*

- *Application/ Recertification Process?*
- *More respectful atmosphere at DCF office?*
- *More places that accept food stamps?*

**Some of you mentioned that you've used the food shelf in your community. Let's spend a few minutes talking about your experiences with food shelves.**

14. How many of you have visited a food shelf? (show of hands) For those of you who haven't used the food shelf, is there a reason you haven't used it? **[High]**

*Probes:*

- *Haven't needed to use it – use other resources?*
- *Transportation?*

- *Hours of operation?*
- *Uncomfortable with charity?*
- *Family doesn't like the food that's offered?*

15. For those you who use the food shelf, how often do you go? What determines how often you go? **[Low]**

*Probes:*

- *Distance?*
- *Transportation?*
- *Hour of operation fit your schedule?*
- *Number of visits per month or amount you can take limited by food shelf?*
- *Kind of food that is offered?*

16. How has your experience with the food shelf been? **[High]**

*Probes:*

- *Do you feel welcome?*
- *Does your family like the food that's offered?*
- *Do you have a choice of food?*
- *Would you like more fresh fruits and vegetables?*
- *Were there limits on how much food you could take?*
- *Are the hours convenient?*

If you've used more than 1 food shelf, was one better than the other? Why?

17. Think about what would make the food shelf that serves your community better. **[Low]**

*Probes:*

- *Hours of operation?*
- *Distance?*
- *Transportation or delivery?*
- *Food that is offered?*
- *Attitude?*

Would that make it more likely that you would use the food shelf – or use it more often? (RQ 9)

**For the next few minutes, I'd like to hear about your experience with the food programs offered to your children at school. Let's start with school breakfast.**

18. Does your child's school offer a school breakfast program? (show of hands)  
If so, do your children take advantage of it? If not, why? **[High]**

*Probes:*

- *Time breakfast is served at school? (e.g. before child arrives)*
- *Don't like what's served?*
- *Prefer to eat at home?*
- *Stigma?*

19. How many of your children eat the school lunch? (Show of hands) If your children eat the school lunch, do they receive free or reduced prices? (show of hands) If they don't, why not? **[High]**

*Probes:*

- *Didn't know it was available?*
- *Didn't think we'd be eligible?*
- *Application process?*
- *Stigma? (different card, etc.)*

20. How many of your children usually pack their lunch, rather than eating the school lunch? (show of hands?) Why do they pack their lunch? **[Low]**

*Probes:*

- *Convenience?*
- *Cost of school lunch?*
- *Prefers to bring lunch from home, don't like what they serve?*
- *Likes the food served by the school?*

If they bring their lunch, what do they usually pack?

21. Can you think of anything that would make the school breakfast or lunch programs better? **[Medium]**

*Probes:*

- *Kind of food served?*
- *Take away stigma of free or reduced cost meals?*
- *Simpler application process?*

**Sometimes meal routines and what we eat changes, depending on the time of year. Take a minute to think about your family's mealtimes in summer.**

22. Does your family's routine and costs around mealtime change during the summer? If

so, how does it change? **[High]**

*Probes:*

- *Number of meals your children eat a day?*
- *Where they eat their meals?*
- *What you serve?*
- *Are mealtimes less regular?*

**I'd like to switch gears for a minute to look WIC, the nutrition program for nursing mothers, infants and young children. Is everyone familiar with that program?**

23. Are you getting WIC now or have you ever used it? (show of hands) (RQ 4), If yes, would you prefer home delivery of food or vouchers that you can use at a grocer store? Why? **[Low]**

**We're just about done. But before we finish I'd like to get your opinion on a couple of broad issues.**

24. Surveys indicate that over 3,000 families in Washington County have trouble putting food on the table for their families. Why do you think this is? Can we go around the table and each person name one or two of the barriers to families putting food on the table in Washington County? **[High]**

25. What food and nutrition programs or resources are missing from your community? **[Medium]**

If you could invent a new program, what would it look like? Let's go around again.

26. Is there anything that I haven't asked you about food and nutrition programs in Washington County that I should have? Anything you'd like to add?