

# Fighting hunger in Wisconsin communities



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**“Too many people are hungry.”**

—Comments from participants in programs based on Cooperative Extension’s Hunger Close to Home series.

## Situation

Hunger and food insecurity are *real* problems for Wisconsin families. Statewide, approximately 560,000 people live in households that are food insecure; that is, they do not have access at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life. One out of every 11 Wisconsin households is food insecure. Low-income families have alarmingly high rates of food insecurity (44%) and hunger (19%).

According to 2007 Census data, 10.8% of Wisconsin residents live in poverty. In many more households, incomes are considered above the poverty line, but are still low enough to qualify families for government assistance programs such as food stamps and BadgerCare health insurance. In total, almost one quarter of our population, or more than one million Wisconsin residents, are considered to be low-income or living in poverty.

Statewide unemployment rates are increasing—4.9% in 2007 compared to 3% in 1999. Relative to other states, Wisconsin households have become more food insecure and hungry, and are seeking more food assistance.

## Response

Cooperative Extension’s Family Living educators work in local communities to raise awareness about food insecurity and poverty, and to help low-income families gain knowledge and skills to improve their situations. Educational programming related to food security is provided on the individual level (such as by teaching families how to stretch food dollars), and at the community level; for example, by convening a local hunger task force.

## Outcomes

**Collaborations.** Cooperative Extension and the Wisconsin Department of Health Services have provided leadership for the Wisconsin Food Security Consortium, a statewide coalition dedicated to ending hunger in Wisconsin (<http://www.endhungerwi.org>). The Consortium has developed an action plan to end hunger in the state and has hosted many forums on the issue. In 2006, 28 active hunger prevention coalitions were serving 30 Wisconsin counties, with Family Living Programs playing key roles. In Pierce County alone, a local hunger prevention council distributed nearly 3,000 pounds of donated venison to more than 800 individuals and families.

**Understanding hunger.** Family Living Programs provides hunger awareness education to help communities better understand the scope of the problem, its underlying causes and potential solutions. A publication series, *Hunger Close to Home*, was created to help educators and other stakeholders share research-based information in their communities. Family Living staff report that programs based on



*Hunger Close to Home* are making a difference. Participants report a greater understanding of the extent of food insecurity and hunger. When asked to name the most important thing they learned, participants said: "It's closer to home than I thought." "The stats were staggering!" "It's a huge problem!" "It is a real and serious issue that needs to be addressed." "Too many people are hungry."

**Poverty education.** Poverty and food insecurity are closely linked. Family Living Programs provides poverty awareness education and training for working with a low-income audience and has facilitated over 125 local poverty awareness programs reaching more than 6,500 people statewide. Evaluations show striking increases in understanding among participants, and changes in the way they interact with low-income clients.

Cooperative Extension created the Poverty Awareness for Community Engagement (PACE) curriculum, a research-based, peer-reviewed curriculum to meet the needs of Wisconsin communities and the programming goals of the educators who use it.

**Research.** Cooperative Extension conducts research to better understand the extent of food insecurity and hunger in Wisconsin, and the characteristics of food insecure households. For example, one survey of food pantry clients showed that 25% have a long-term disability or health problem that limits their ability to work. Thirty-three percent are employed and 44% have at least one employed person in the household. Only 18% of those who are employed earn more than \$8 an hour. The survey led to increased awareness and steps aimed at alleviating hunger.

Cooperative Extension also helped communities conduct a school-based survey of the food security status of local families, their participation in federal nutrition assistance programs, child and parent preferences related to school meals and more. In 2003 and 2004, 42 schools in 14 counties participated.

**Supporting community food production resources.** Cooperative Extension enhances access to locally produced fresh produce through community gardens or farmers' markets, providing increased quantity and quality of nutritious food to low-income families.

FEAST, the Nutrition Coalition of the Chequamegon Region, created a Mobile Farmers' Market to reach rural Ashland and Bayfield counties, where no markets exist for senior citizens and WIC participants to use farmers' market vouchers. The Mobile Market made 17 visits to seven sites. Eighty-four percent of seniors and WIC clients surveyed said they were eating more fresh fruits and vegetables as a result, and 97% said they planned to use the market the following year. Producers also benefited from this new outlet for their crops.

The Dane County Hunger Prevention Council created a South Madison farmers' market so that WIC families and low-income seniors could use farmers' market vouchers to bring home more fresh fruits and vegetables. Of the 27 vendors at the market in 2004, more than 20 were certified to accept WIC vouchers. WIC and senior shoppers have increased by over 50%.

**Supporting Child Nutrition Programs.** Cooperative Extension improves access and increases participation in school meals. Free and reduced price school lunch and breakfast, free summer meals and after-school snacks

provide nutritious meals for children who might not otherwise receive them.

Statewide, Cooperative Extension has helped facilitate the development of summer meal sites. Brown County and Cooperative Extension program partners started a summer breakfast program, serving over 6,000 meals at three sites in the first year. Due to its success, the Green Bay School Food Service continued the program, expanded it to include lunch, and now serves more than 1,500 children on an average day at 38 sites around the county.

Cooperative Extension partners with the state Department of Public Instruction to improve access to school breakfast. Examples of outcomes from this partnership include the creation of 186 new school breakfast programs and improvement of 373 school breakfast programs using funds from the Nutrition Enhancement Breakfast Grants between 2004 and 2007.

Through collaboration, education and research, Cooperative Extension has made significant contributions to reducing hunger in our state.

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