



Ensuring food security for Wisconsin households

UW-Extension Family Living Programs works with partners to strengthen the foundation for ensuring food security for all households.



Approximately 1 in 9 Wisconsin households lacks assured access to enough food for a healthy and active life. These households—known as food insecure—may run out of food, cut back on the size of meals, or skip meals entirely due to lack of money. Food insecurity increases the risk of health problems, and is linked to worse educational outcomes for children.

Wisconsin households have become more food insecure since the start of the Great Recession. The food insecurity rate jumped from 8.5% in 2006-2007 to 12.5% during 2008-2009. While the rate has fallen slightly in the recovery period following the recession, it remains considerably higher than in pre-recession levels.

The burden of food insecurity varies in the state, with some sectors of the population more greatly affected. At particularly high risk are households with:

- Limited incomes
- A disabled member or noncitizens
- People of color
- Low levels of education
- Children

University of Wisconsin-Extension Family Living Programs works with partners to strengthen the foundation for ensuring food security for all households. This foundation includes:

- Communities that support economic well-being.

- Strong federal food and nutrition programs.
- Adequate access to and availability of safe, healthy, and affordable food.
- A strong and accessible emergency/charitable food safety net.

Connecting communities to resources that address food security

Family Living Programs, in partnership with the UW-Madison School of Human Ecology and the Applied Population Lab, developed the [Wisconsin Food Security Project](#), an interactive data and mapping tool to assist local planners and policy makers in assessing the food security infrastructure.

Over 150 individuals have been trained in the use of the website. In 2014, the site received nearly 18,000 visits accounting for approximately 8,000 unique visitors.

This innovative online resource has been used to:

- Identify community strengths and gaps related to food security.
- Inform local community assessments.
- Develop program plans and educate community members on food security.
- Access data to include in grant applications.

Family Living Programs Impact Report

Growing local farmers' markets and increasing access for FoodShare participants

Approximately 15% of the state's population participates in the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), known as FoodShare in Wisconsin. Farmers' markets offer great opportunities to buy seasonal, local and healthy produce, and provide opportunities to teach people about nutrition and encourage healthier habits.

UW-Extension and the Wisconsin Department of Health Services collaborated to provide statewide coordination and education for communities interested in expanding FoodShare recipients' access to healthy foods through farmers' markets.

These collective efforts contributed to an increase in the number of farmers' markets accepting payments with FoodShare benefits from 68 in 2013 to 116 in 2014. The growth in the new customer base contributed positively to the economies of farmers with over \$249,200 in FoodShare redemptions made at farmers' markets in 2014.

Food pantries supporting healthy habits

Food pantries are a key component of the food environment for low-income individuals and make a significant contribution to the overall quality of foods they consume. Food pantry guests may be at higher risk for poor health, including diet-related chronic disease and foodborne illness.

UW-Extension developed the [Safe & Healthy Food Pantries Project](#) in collaboration with the Wisconsin Community Action Program Association (WISCAP) with a grant

from the Wisconsin Partnership Program at the UW-Madison School of Medicine and Public Health.

The materials developed as part of the project are designed to support food pantries in making improvements to the food pantry environment so that all foods offered are safe and nutritious. Another goal is to make it easier for food pantry guests to choose healthy foods.

In 2014, the project was piloted in 6 Wisconsin food pantries in 5 counties and reached an average of 7,755 individuals per month. All pilot pantries completed a self-assessment of current food procurement, inventory and distribution practices, and developed action plans to improve the nutritional quality and safety of foods distributed.

Actions taken in the pilot project food pantries included:

- Development of a food safety and nutrition policy (100%).
- New partnerships with local gardeners and farmers who provided fresh produce donations (100%).
- Improved food pantry layout and display of messaging to encourage selection of healthy choices (50%).
- Prioritized procurement of healthy food items (fruits, vegetables, low-sodium canned goods, canned goods with no added sugar, whole wheat products, low fat or no-fat dairy) (67%).

Food pantry staff report that the changes they made to food pantry operations has contributed positively to the availability of safe and healthy foods. Staff has observed changes in food pantry client behavior with regards to the selection of more nutritious products.

Tracking and responding to food insecurity in schools

With funding from a USDA child hunger initiative, UW-Extension formed partnerships with elementary schools in Wisconsin to assess food insecurity and to identify strategies for intervention.

Over the course of the project (2012-2014), 26 largely low-income schools participated, receiving localized information on food insecurity, financial behaviors, and economic hardships. This research documented strikingly high rates of food insecurity and child hunger. This information was widely shared in the participating communities, and a team of Extension colleagues continues working to develop resources and best practices to support schools in addressing child hunger.

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By connecting communities with resources to address food insecurity; working with farmers' markets to allow FoodShare participants to more easily purchase healthy foods; helping food pantries encourage clients to make safe and healthy food choices; and identifying food insecurity in Wisconsin schools; UW-Extension family living educators are strengthening access and availability to healthy food.



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