In 2018, The Colorado Health Foundation released the Colorado Blueprint to End Hunger, a statewide plan to ensure all Coloradans have access to the food they need to thrive. The Colorado Health Foundation and the statewide Colorado Blueprint to End Hunger team have galvanized communities across the state to engage in this work. The Mesa County Blueprint to End Hunger was made possible through a planning grant from The Colorado Health Foundation. Western Colorado Community Foundation was the grant recipient and facilitator of the planning process.

This document was prepared after many meetings and conversations with organization and agency members of the Mesa County Hunger Alliance. Thanks to their passion, engagement, visioning and collaboration this Blueprint was compiled to support Mesa County’s efforts to achieve greater food security over the next five years.

A special thank you to Jody Valente, Anne Wenzel and Amanda McQuade, primary authors of the Mesa County Blueprint to End Hunger.

The Mesa County Hunger Alliance includes, but is not limited to, the following organizations and agencies:

**Child and Migrant Services**
www.migrantservicesgv.org

**Clifton Christian Church Food Bank**
www.cliftonchristianchurch.com

**Community Alliance for Education & Hunger Relief, Colorado State University**
communityalliance.extension.colostate.edu

**Community Food Bank**
www.foodbankgj.org

**Cooking Matters**
co.cookingmatters.org

**First Presbyterian Church**
www.firstpresgj.org

**Food Bank of the Rockies**
www.foodbankrockies.org/ws

**Grand Valley Catholic Outreach**
www.catholicoutreach.org

**Hilltop Family Resource Center**
www.htop.org

**HomewardBound of the Grand Valley**
www.homewardboundgv.org

**Kids Aid Backpack Program**
www.kidsaidcolorado.org

**Meals on Wheels Mesa County**
www.mealsonwheelsmesacounty.org

**Mesa County Department of Human Services SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program)**
humanservices.mesacounty.us

**Mesa County Public Health Department WIC (Women, Infants, and Children)**
health.mesacounty.us/women-infants-children-wic

**Mesa County Valley School District 51**
www.d51schools.org/cms/One.aspx?portalId=81872&pageId=159392

**Mutual Aid Partners**
www.mutualaidpartners.org

**United Way of Mesa County**
www.unitedwaymesacounty.org

**Salvation Army**
www.facebook.com/GJSal

**St. Mary’s Medical Center – Mission Integration**
www.sclhealth.org/locations/st-marys-medical-center/about/community-benefit

**Western Colorado 2-1-1**
www.wc211.org
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MESA COUNTY’S BLUEPRINT TO END HUNGER

The Mesa County Blueprint to End Hunger is a tool to be used by all community members, from City and County elected officials and business leaders, to hunger relief providers, to growers and farmers in our region, and to individuals who want to see a strong and thriving economy. The document is a call to action to build upon the commendable work our community has already done to meet food insecurity needs. The intent is to use this action plan to better understand Mesa County’s landscape of hunger relief providers, provide context surrounding the issue of food insecurity, and lay out concrete steps that can help ensure all people receive access to the nutritious foods they need to thrive.

The onset of COVID-19 in 2020 underscored the need for flexibility and ability to quickly pivot operations to meet social distancing requirements and serve a dramatic increase in needs. Hunger relief providers proved to be nimble and committed, providing more food than ever before in many cases. This Blueprint represents a point-in-time summary as of May 2021 and captures where our community is in the planning and implementation of hunger relief efforts. As the needs and times change, the data and action steps will as well.
GOAL 1
Develop a coordinated emergency and short-term hunger relief system in Mesa County that encourages greater collaboration and increased operating efficiencies and effectiveness in addressing hunger.

GOAL 2
Maximize enrollment in food assistance programs and expand use of federal nutrition programs for hunger relief.

GOAL 3
Increase the amount of high quality, nutritious foods available for people who are hungry.

GOAL 4
Expand and systematize grocery rescue and food recovery efforts so that nutritious food is not thrown away, but directed to hunger relief efforts.

GOAL 5
Increase public awareness that hunger is an issue in western Colorado which affects the larger community.
INTRODUCTION TO MESA COUNTY

Mesa County, Colorado is one of the most western counties in the state, located over the Rocky Mountains on the way to high desert Utah, with a population of about 150,000 residents. Grand Junction is located within Mesa County and is the largest city between Denver and Salt Lake City, with a population of just over 63,000 people. Grand Junction boasts various strong and growing institutions, including Colorado Mesa University with its enrollment of about 11,000 students, and St. Mary's Medical Center, which employs 1,700 full-time staff and provides an estimated $200 million in total community benefit to the region. Mesa County is also home to small towns including Palisade with its peach orchards and many wineries, and Fruita, Loma and Whitewater, all adjacent to National Conservation Areas. Unique geography is one thing that sets Mesa County apart, including the Grand Mesa, Colorado National Monument and Book Cliffs range.

Mesa County’s economy has tended to experience dramatic fluctuations due to a historically strong reliance on the oil and gas industry, which has ebbed and flowed in Mesa County since Black Sunday in 1982, when Exxon Mobile ceased operations on the Western Slope, leaving thousands without work. More recently, Mesa County has increased its investments in the outdoor recreation industry; this industry employs over 2,000 people and contributes $300 million to the local economy. Another significant employer for the region includes health care, with four regional hospitals employing over 10,000 Mesa County residents and serving approximately half a million people who live in western Colorado. Construction is another large sector, employing nearly 5,000 people, along with Mesa County Valley School District 51 (District 51), which is the 14th largest school district in the state, employing about 2,700 individuals and serving 22,000 students.

Many residents in Mesa County experience food insecurity. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines food insecurity as the lack of consistent access to sufficient food for an active and healthy lifestyle. According to Feeding America, 14% of Mesa County residents - 20,500 individuals - are considered food insecure. The Colorado Department of Education reports that during the 2020/21 school year, 52% of children in District 51 – 10,500 students - qualified for free or reduced price lunch, a quantifiable measure of food insecurity. There are a number of Title 1 elementary schools with over 85% of their student body eligible for free or reduced price lunch. As of 2018, nearly 16% of Mesa County residents lived below the federal poverty line, 3% more than the national average. The median annual income for a household in Mesa County was $53,680, as compared with $61,900 nationally.
Mesa County’s goals to reduce food insecurity are closely aligned with the five goals of the Colorado Blueprint to End Hunger while building on local needs, strengths, and opportunities of organizational partners here in Mesa County. This is a local action plan to address hunger in our community. Like all communities, Mesa County has unique assets that have been incorporated and built on in developing our own local action plan.

### WHY A BLUEPRINT TO END HUNGER?

Mesa County's goals to reduce food insecurity are closely aligned with the five goals of the **Colorado Blueprint to End Hunger** while building on local needs, strengths, and opportunities of organizational partners here in Mesa County. This is a local action plan to address hunger in our community. Like all communities, Mesa County has unique assets that have been incorporated and built on in developing our own local action plan.

### COMMUNITY ASSETS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>A strong history of collaboration amongst hunger relief providers</strong></th>
<th><strong>A school district that goes beyond basic school meals to provide nutritious, made-from-scratch meals and pilots creative models to best address hunger needs</strong> that have garnered state and national attention</th>
<th><strong>A regional branch of Food Bank of the Rockies, a subsidiary of Feeding America, with their western Colorado operations and distribution center located in Mesa County</strong></th>
<th><strong>A vibrant farming community, with Mesa County being the top tree fruit producer in the state</strong></th>
<th><strong>A location that is a mix of both urban and rural, serving as the largest population center between Denver and Salt Lake City, with large sections of agricultural and public lands</strong></th>
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COMMUNITY VALUES AND COMMITMENTS

1. Preserving and supporting the dignity of all people who are hungry. Many of those in need of food assistance find themselves in a short-term crisis situation. Others are considered the working poor - individuals who spend at least 27 weeks working or looking for work - but whose incomes fall below the federal poverty level. They rely on food assistance programs to meet basic needs and can be uncomfortable about their circumstances. As Mesa County expands hunger relief efforts, it is important to understand the dynamics of stigma and to preserve dignity of those who are food insecure.

2. Providing healthy and nutritious food. While canned food and bakery items are readily available, Mesa County food pantries struggle to offer enough dairy, meat and fresh produce to clients. These items are both perishable and expensive. We recognize that not all food is created equal, and that certain types of foods are healthier and more nutritious. It is a paradoxical situation that many who are food insecure are overweight because of the types of calories they eat. The strategies of this Blueprint strive to build cross-sector partnerships, infrastructure and investments that are intended to increase the amount of nutritious foods distributed to our hunger relief networks.

3. Commitment to collaboration and inter-sector programs and solutions. Mesa County is recognized as being a highly collaborative community. Our efforts to address hunger build on this reputation and history of collaboration as we expand program offerings and design new initiatives. This Blueprint is intended to bolster our county’s hunger relief providers to fulfill their organizational missions and do what they do best: provide food to people with dignity and compassion, connect them with services to help them through challenging times, and even provide spiritual guidance if sought, as many pantries are located within houses of worship.

4. Commitment to innovative and entrepreneurial approaches. Mesa County is also recognized as a community that tries new approaches to community problem-solving. From health care innovations pioneered by Rocky Mountain Health Plans to research efforts in District 51 to intervene with youth suicide, Mesa County has highly dedicated and entrepreneurial leaders working on hunger issues. The community supports economic growth across sectors as an effective anti-hunger strategy.

We recognize the connection between hunger and high obesity rates, due to easy access to inexpensive foods that contribute to health problems, including diabetes and heart disease.
The Colorado Health Foundation released the *Colorado Blueprint to End Hunger* in January 2018. For Mesa County, the release came at an opportune time. In 2014, four years prior to the Blueprint’s release, Western Colorado Community Foundation (WCCF) started working in earnest with community partners to better address food insecurity needs in Mesa County, especially those faced by children and youth. At the time, Kids Aid, the weekend backpack program, was serving more children than ever before, providing bags of food each Friday and helping them come back to school on Monday, ready to learn. District 51’s grant funding to provide summer school enrichment programs, complete with regular meals, decreased substantially; starting in 2015, several neighborhoods with free and reduced rates of over 80% no longer had accessible, free summer meal options for children.

WCCF began convening government and nonprofit organizations working in hunger relief and basic needs to identify gaps in service. Out of these convenings, WCCF partnered with District 51’s Food and Nutrition Services to pilot a summer mobile meal program, the Lunch Lizard, which provides nutritious meals reimbursed by the USDA, serving children ages 0-18. Additionally, WCCF and United Way of Mesa County began convening the Mesa County Hunger Alliance. This Alliance is composed of over 20 hunger relief organizations, agencies and churches which meet quarterly to network and determine if there are areas to improve for building a stronger hunger relief system.

Consensus is clear that hunger is a problem here in Mesa County. There are many contributing factors to this complicated issue; finding consensus on how to address the problem and the necessary resources has been more challenging. In January 2018, when Colorado became the fourth state to release a comprehensive *Blueprint to End Hunger*, it created a foundation for Mesa County to build on and provided a launch pad to better determine our county’s needs within the comprehensive statewide framework.

In June 2018, WCCF held a Leadership Forum, bringing together over 60 Mesa County leaders from various sectors to discuss the *Colorado Blueprint to End Hunger*. This forum initiated a process to develop action plans to better address hunger in Mesa County. Attendees were very interested in supporting shared infrastructure that would raise all ships working in hunger relief. Priority needs that emerged from this forum included the need to better coordinate efforts of local hunger relief organizations to improve operating efficiencies and expand programs, and the importance of increasing enrollment in food assistance programs.

In October 2018, WCCF received a planning grant from The Colorado Health Foundation to begin the process of developing its own local action plan, the *Mesa County Blueprint to End Hunger*. With this funding, WCCF has worked with Mesa County’s hunger relief organizations to develop a coordinated approach to address food insecurity in our county. Over the next five years, into 2025, our community can refer to this Blueprint, with the long-term goal of involving more partners and embracing new initiatives to end hunger.
GOAL 1: Develop a coordinated emergency and short-term hunger relief system in Mesa County that encourages greater collaboration and increased operating efficiencies and effectiveness in addressing hunger.

CONTEXT AND DISCUSSION

There are a number of agencies and organizations spread across Mesa County that serve our community with food pantry sites, mobile pantries, pop up food distributions, warehouse and food storage facilities. Some of these entities have an exclusive hunger relief mission, while others provide emergency food in support of their primary mission.

Mesa County’s hunger relief assets include Food Bank of the Rockies (FBR), a large hunger relief subsidiary of Feeding America, with its western Colorado operation based out of Mesa County. Grand Valley Catholic Outreach is Mesa County’s main lunchtime soup kitchen, serving hundreds of people Monday through Saturday at its central location. HomewardBound provides dinnertime meals. In addition, the local Salvation Army provides food to our community and Mesa County has over ten organizations and church groups that run stationary and/or mobile food pantries; some of these are only open once per month. There are two large emergency food pantries Community Food Bank and Clifton Christian Church Food Bank which are located in the central and east sides of town, respectively. Both organizations have seen tremendous growth in numbers served and pounds of food distributed in the past three years.

Another asset is Mesa County Valley School District 51’s Food and Nutrition Services (District 51), which is a critical organization in addressing child hunger in Mesa County. About half of the 22,000 students in the school district are eligible for free or reduced price breakfast and lunch. District 51’s Food and Nutrition Services is recognized across the State of Colorado for their innovation. Their accomplishments include converting meals from processed foods to made-from-scratch cooking, installing youth-sized salad bars in elementary schools, piloting a food recovery program in several elementary schools, and starting a mobile summer meals program to provide meals to children in low-income communities. District 51 also has a Wellness Committee and a Wellness Policy which includes community stakeholders, including parents, nutritionists, physicians, and students. Kids Aid operates the county’s primary Backpack Program, working closely with District 51 and providing bags of food to students in need over weekends and school breaks. About 2,000 food bags are provided to students weekly, helping to ensure they have enough to eat when school meals are not accessible.

According to Census data, nearly 20% of Mesa County’s population are seniors, over the age of 65. The community is attractive to retirees, with its climate and recreational activities. In Colorado, it is estimated that one in ten seniors are food insecure, not knowing where their next meal will come from. Meals on Wheels Mesa County (MOW) works to ensure seniors have access to nutritious meals; they served over 120,000 meals in 2019, or about 500 meals per day of operation. Due to COVID-19, MOW served 30% more seniors in 2020 than in 2019, as income requirements were waived to better meet the needs of seniors who self-
isolated in order to decrease their risk of contracting COVID-19. Long-term goals for MOW include increased food storage and a larger commercial kitchen to prepare meals.

Critical to addressing food insecurity is the Mesa County Hunger Alliance, a coalition of over 20 agencies and organizations working in hunger relief which are poised to facilitate collaboration to address hunger in Mesa County. The Hunger Alliance comes together to share information and learn from one another and are the key players that are working to support families and individuals facing hunger in our community.

**STRATEGIES:**

1. **Strengthen our existing hunger relief system by creating more efficiencies and collaboration** to share information, identify gaps in services, and explore ways organizations can meet goals by coordinating efforts

2. **Broaden the network of hunger relief partners and agencies who respond to food insecurity** in our community

3. **Make strategic investments in assets that can ideally be shared by multiple organizations**
GOAL 1

ACTION STEPS to develop a coordinated emergency and short-term hunger relief system in Mesa County:

1. **Strengthen our existing hunger relief system by creating more efficiencies and collaboration**

Connect food insecure individuals to resources that help them address basic needs by helping food pantries provide client referrals to other services available in the community.

- Support Western Colorado 2-1-1 by providing them with up-to-date information
- Increase dissemination and utilization of ideas and resources from Hunger Free Colorado’s Food Pantry Network, *Colorado Blueprint to End Hunger* workgroups, and from other Colorado counties working on plans to decrease hunger
- Facilitate best practice sharing among hunger relief organizations through the Mesa County Hunger Alliance
- Continue to support and build on the SNAP Ambassador Pilot Program (refer to Goal 2)

2. **Strengthen hunger relief organizations within Mesa County by increasing coordination and collaboration via the Mesa County Hunger Alliance.**

- Conduct regular meetings of the Mesa County Hunger Alliance to share information, increase organizational collaboration and facilitate learning
- Provide education on new initiatives, opportunities, and legislation that impact hunger relief organizations and/or their clients
- Identify and provide education/training relevant to nonprofit management or best-practices for hunger relief organizations

3. **Explore the feasibility of starting an AmeriCorps program in Mesa County.**

- Determine the interest by the Hunger Alliance to host AmeriCorps volunteer(s) to assist in increasing organizational capacity of hunger relief organizations; identify a lead agency to potentially administer an AmeriCorps program in Mesa County
GOAL 1

2 Broaden the network of hunger relief partners and agencies who respond to food insecurity

Expand community partnerships to address food insecurity beyond the traditional hunger relief organizations.

• Build partnerships with the Mesa County health care community to increase the referral network to connect more community members to food resources
• Encourage physicians, clinics (MarillacHealth and Central High School), and other providers to ask questions in both English and Spanish about their clients’ food security, utilizing the Hunger Vital

Sign^10
• Encourage primary care practices and clinics to engage in the Accountable Health Communities Model (AHCM) screening tool to identify social determinants of health
• Encourage use of the Community Resource Network (CRN) by Mesa County human service and medical providers to better share information on patient needs
• Provide up-to-date referral information about different ways people can get support (emergency food, federal food assistance, school meals, Lunch Lizard summer meals)

3 Make strategic investments in assets that can ideally be shared by multiple organizations

Support the development of two lead food pantries in the central and east sides of Mesa County.

With growth projected within Mesa County in the coming years, it is expected that there will be increased demands for food. In 2020, Community Food Bank moved to a larger, more centrally located warehouse to better meet the needs of the community and provide additional services to clients. Clifton Christian Church Food Bank, the other large food pantry on the eastern side of town, currently operates at capacity (in terms of storage space, adequate refrigeration, limited extra space for office and added services). Mesa County envisions two strong and well-resourced brick-and-mortar food pantries that work together to meet the needs of the Grand Valley. Both main food pantries need adequate dry and cold storage, paid staff to raise funds and oversee volunteers, provide nutrition education classes, enrollment for SNAP and WIC, and other expanded services at their sites, becoming more full service food pantries over time.

By supporting these community investments, clients will: 1) have better access to services due to pantries being accessible by public transportation and 2) have basic needs supported through on-site referral services. Pantries will be better able to systematize and professionalize the process of acquiring, storing, and, when needed, disposing of food, leaving hunger relief organizations with more capacity to fulfill their organizational missions.

• Support expansion and adequate staffing for Community Food Bank, with better space for food storage, client and volunteer flow, and private administrative offices to conduct information and food assistance referral services
• Determine potential for shared space at Community Food Bank to benefit the Mesa County Hunger Alliance, such as additional cold storage for organizations to use
GOAL 1

• Support expansion and adequate facilities for a Clifton-based food pantry, at Clifton Christian Church Food Bank, or at a second Clifton-based location

Determine the interest in and feasibility of a shared commercial kitchen to meet increased demand for meals and snacks for seniors and children.

Meals on Wheels Mesa County (MOW) is a critical organization supporting at-risk seniors in our community. Their needs to better support Mesa County seniors include a larger commercial kitchen to prepare additional meals, an expanded volunteer delivery system, and new means of transportation to help homebound seniors get to group meal sites. MOW is producing the maximum number of meals that they can from their kitchen and would like to have greater capacity to serve seniors on their wait list. There is interest from various nonprofit organizations to gain access to a shared commercial kitchen to prepare meals for clients, provide nutrition education classes and to provide space for food prep and cooking demonstrations.

• Determine need for a shared commercial kitchen space, that would ideally be used to support multiple partners
• Identify funding sources within partner organizations and need for large community investments (grants, loans, capital campaigns)

Determine the need for a central food acquisition and distribution hub designed to safely handle food from a variety of sources including grocery rescue, food donations, and purchases.

Mesa County has various organizations working to acquire, store and distribute food to their clients. Each organization operates differently, with their own food sources, volunteers and transportation in place. This long-term goal would explore the need for and feasibility of a shared food hub to streamline the food acquisition and distribution flow, ultimately saving on operational costs by sharing resources.

• Identify hunger relief organization partners interested in investing in a central food hub
• Conduct a feasibility study to identify the organization costs of food acquisition, storage, and disposal that could be directed to building and operating the hub
• Identify funding sources within partner organizations and need for large community investments (grants, loans, capital campaigns)
GOAL 2: Maximize enrollment in food assistance programs and expand use of federal nutrition programs for hunger relief

CONTEXT AND DISCUSSION

Thousands of Mesa County residents receive financial support through federal programs that address hunger. These programs include the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP), the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), the School Breakfast Program (SBP), the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), and the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC). These federal programs not only help provide people in our community with nutritious foods, they are also a significant economic driver.

It is estimated that the state of Colorado spends between $1 and $2 billion dollars annually in health care costs due to food insecurity related issues. At the same time, federal programs to address food insecurity are underutilized. The Mesa County Blueprint to End Hunger strives to maximize the dollars that come into our community while simultaneously working to end hunger.

STRATEGIES:

1. **Maximize enrollment in food assistance programs including SNAP and WIC by enrolling more people who are eligible, but not enrolled**
2. **Increase the number of students receiving free or reduced price breakfast and lunch within District 51 through the SBP and the NSLP**
3. **Ensure more children have access to summer meals** through the SFSP program
4. **Expand the number of children, adults and the elderly who receive nutritious snacks and meals** through CACFP and CSFP

Colorado ranks 43rd in the nation for SNAP enrollment and 48th in WIC enrollment

SNAP generates about $48 million in economic stimulus to Mesa County

For every dollar allocated in WIC benefits, the healthcare system saves four dollars by the time the child turns 18
GOAL 2

ACTION STEPS to maximize enrollment in food assistance programs and expand use of federal nutrition programs for hunger relief

1. Maximize enrollment in food assistance programs including SNAP and WIC

Reduce enrollment barriers and support eligible applicants in navigating the SNAP and WIC application processes.

In 2017, only 56% of Mesa County’s population eligible for SNAP was enrolled in the food assistance program. This statistic puts Mesa County as a low enrollment community in a low enrollment state. In response, partner agencies designed a No One Should Go Hungry campaign to increase enrollment in food assistance programs. Furthermore, in recent years local partners established a SNAP Ambassador Pilot Program which trains staff and volunteers at community organizations to assist their clients in the enrollment process; the ambassador provides invaluable assistance and support through the intimidating and multi-step process. The Mesa County Blueprint to End Hunger builds on these initiatives.

- Improve systems to reduce enrollment barriers by building on the partnership with Hilltop Family Resource Center, Public Health, DHS and the SNAP Ambassador program (exemplified by the creation of an Authorization to Disclose Information Form to better inform SNAP Ambassadors of client’s application status, helping them better navigate the process)
- Train additional SNAP Ambassadors and develop and employ strategies to ensure equity to all individuals applying
- Encourage larger food pantries to expand information and referral services for clients and support enrollment efforts in food assistance programs
- Streamline the last step of the SNAP application, in which applicants are interviewed by DHS; encourage DHS to call individuals when feasible to conduct phone interviews and use community-based locations for interviews
- Increase applicants by using outreach vehicles to apply for SNAP and complete WIC referral forms; utilize vehicles equipped with WiFi to assist organizations in enrolling clients in SNAP
- Increase efficiency of the application process by supporting efforts to improve cross-referral opportunities between state and county programs with similar eligibility criteria; Medicaid, SNAP, and TANF share an application, but the eligibility criteria is different for each
- Collaborate with Colorado Mesa University to support enrollment of eligible college students
- Increase the enrollment rate of WIC by identifying eligible families via community organizations and ensure individuals know the Public Charge rule does not apply to WIC
2. **Reduce barriers in participation by addressing stigma surrounding federal food programs**

- Utilize the *No One Should Go Hungry* campaign materials developed by Hilltop Family Resource Center to encourage participation in food assistance programs and communicate that SNAP and WIC strengthen families.

- Apply lessons learned from the Essentials for Childhood grant awarded to Mesa County Public Health and Hilltop Family Resource Center, with the goal of changing norms and reducing stigma around enrolling in food assistance programs.

- Change public perception of SNAP by increasing awareness of the impact SNAP has on both the local economy and individual lives.

- Make SNAP and WIC enrollment free of stigma in western Colorado by empowering community organizations, such as food pantries, to provide referral and enrollment support for their clients.

3. **Increase the number of students receiving free or reduced price breakfast and lunch**

*Increase student enrollment rates in National School Breakfast and Lunch Programs.*

The national school lunch program is one of the most effective programs in addressing childhood hunger. District 51 has been a pioneer in nutritious foods and increasing meal access to children over the past ten years.

- Support District 51 in an awareness campaign regarding the quality and availability of school meals.

- Include information about school breakfast and lunch in hunger relief referral information.

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More than 456,000 people in Colorado use SNAP to help buy healthy food each month.

SNAP, commonly called food stamps, provides food assistance for people who could use a little extra help making ends meet. Enroll in SNAP today and get the groceries you need. You decide where to shop and what to buy.

Applying for SNAP is easy! Call (970) 243-0190.
GOAL 2

4 Ensure children have access to summer meals

Expand the Lunch Lizard summer mobile meals program and Food Bank of the Rockies’ summer meals through the SFSP.

- Reevaluate locations where the Summer Food Service Program will be used through Lunch Lizard and Food Bank of the Rockies each spring to reach as many children as possible
- Continue public awareness campaign about the Lunch Lizard program to ensure high participation rates and promote community partnerships

5 Expand the number of children, adults and the elderly who receive nutritious snacks and meals

Invest in programs and infrastructure that provide nutritious food to children, adults, and the elderly through CACFP and CSFP.

- Support use of the CACFP, communicating to hunger relief organizations that Mesa County Public Health and Food Bank of the Rockies are sponsors of the program and available to connect organizations with the program
- Market the CSFP, letting eligible seniors 60 and over know how to access food boxes
GOAL 3: Increase the amount of high quality, nutritious foods available for people who are hungry

CONTEXT AND DISCUSSION

Generally speaking, food pantries have easy access to shelf-stable and packaged foods to provide to the individuals they serve. Studies show a link between the consumption of these items and health-related problems, including heart disease and obesity. Packaged and preserved foods are easier to collect through food drives and less expensive to buy. Food pantries have historically offered limited meat, dairy products and fresh produce to their clients, and frequently run out of these items. These fresh food items are more expensive to buy and require refrigeration capacity so that foods do not spoil.

One of the Mesa County Blueprint to End Hunger’s values is to provide more healthy and nutritious food through the hunger relief system. This is reflected in Mesa County’s adoption of the SNAP Double Up Food Bucks program, and support of innovative programs unique to Mesa County, such as Community Alliance for Education and Hunger Relief, the Snack Station Food Recovery Program at District 51, the Lunch Lizard mobile meals program, and the dehydration program at Food Bank of the Rockies.

Recently, there has been more attention on food as medicine, encouraging awareness of how the foods we eat impact our ability to reach our full potential. Working off Mesa County’s collaborative spirit, we can better communicate that experiencing persistent hunger can happen to anyone who falls on unfortunate circumstances or has challenges accessing food due to limited mobility or access to transportation. We can work to increase public understanding that food is a key component to creating a productive, healthy workforce and community.

STRATEGIES:

1. **Increase the availability of nutritious foods** (meat, dairy and Colorado grown fruits and vegetables) accessible through the hunger relief system

2. **Support school- and community-based nutrition and education programs**

3. **Engage local growers and producers of food in partnership efforts**

Food pantries have easy access to shelf-stable and packaged foods that are high in preservatives, sodium and other unhealthy ingredients that cause health-related problems, including heart disease and obesity.
GOAL 3

ACTION STEPS to increase the amount of high quality, nutritious foods available for people who are hungry

1. **Increase the availability of nutritious foods accessible through the hunger relief system**

   Increase the amount of healthy food that is accessible through the hunger relief system in Mesa County by supporting innovative programs that focus on healthy food.

   Innovative programs in Mesa County include Colorado State University’s Community Alliance for Education and Hunger Relief, which grew nearly 80,000 pounds of produce for hunger relief in 2020. This program donates fresh produce to food pantries and works with District 51 to provide locally sourced produce to students’ plates. Another program is District 51’s Snack Station pilot, a program that recovers uneaten produce, milks and yogurts and provides USDA Smart Snack approved foods to low-income elementary schools. This five-school pilot ensures that children have access to healthy snacks during times when breakfast and lunch are not served.

   • Support the Community Alliance for Education and Hunger Relief’s work to provide fresh produce to hunger relief organizations through its farm-to-food bank program
   • Expand District 51’s Snack Station program to other schools
   • Expand use of Double Up Food Bucks at Mesa County Farmer’s Markets, with support from Nourish Colorado
   • Explore options and need for a sub packaging operation at a location like Food Bank of the Rockies or within a potential Mesa County food pantry hub (see Goal 1) so that bulk produce can be safely subdivided for easy distribution
GOAL 3

Support school- and community-based nutrition and education programs

Increase school- and community-based nutrition education so that individuals gain access to nutritious foods and food preparation skills.

- Support District 51’s goals within their Wellness Policy, which includes integrating nutrition education into school lessons
- Support Community Alliance for Education and Hunger Relief in providing nutrition education to students from District 51 and youth organizations, including Eureka! McConnell Science Museum and Riverside Educational Center
- Support referral services at hunger relief organizations to nutrition education programs such as Cooking Matters
- Potentially invest in shared infrastructure for hunger relief organizations to increase organizational capacity to provide nutrition education classes and food preparation demonstrations, per Goal 1

DISTRICT 51’S WELLNESS POLICY GOALS INCLUDE:

- Increasing time for students to eat lunch, resulting in less food waste and supporting an afternoon of learning
- Increasing access to nutritious school meals throughout the day, eliminating the need for teachers to buy and provide snacks for hungry students
3 Engage local growers and producers of food in partnership efforts

Increase the amount of healthy food available in the hunger relief system by building relationships with agricultural producers.

Food Bank of the Rockies and food corporations such as Kroger have been increasing the amount of produce, meats, and dairy to area food pantries. In western Colorado, fresh foods are also sourced directly from agricultural producers, which are typically donated or compensated for limited costs. Acknowledging the wealth of agricultural products western Colorado grows, along with the advent of COVID-19 (which underscored the importance of having systems where growers have access to infrastructure to provide food to individuals in need), the Mesa County Blueprint to End Hunger will strive to increase relationships with local growers in a way that is also beneficial to them. Successful models, including the Community Alliance program and farm-to-foodbank purchasing by food banks in the region, will be expanded. These kinds of partnerships engage farmers as true stakeholders in the effort to end hunger.

- Increase Food Bank of the Rockies and food pantry relationships with local growers and food producers
- Identify potential grants and supporting legislation that increase the amount of Colorado grown produce that goes to food pantries
- Expand District 51’s Food and Nutrition Services efforts to purchase Colorado products by increasing community awareness of local procurement practices and increasing participation rates in school lunch and breakfast programs

Increase the amount of healthy food available in the hunger relief system by supporting collaborative models that would benefit growers and the hunger relief community.

Mesa County and the Western Slope are known throughout the state for their peaches. The storage life of peaches is limited; a bumper crop may saturate the markets, leaving growers without an outlet to recuperate costs. Cosmetic flaws also reduce the product’s value. In these instances, donating to food banks may not be an option for producers due to additional costs and logistical challenges. This leaves many growers with no other option than to compost or dispose of their surplus.

To best utilize our region’s fresh produce, value-added processing such as individual quick freeze (IQF) should be explored as a means to preserve nutrient rich foods.

- Determine interest for IQF and increased food dehydration capacity by both hunger relief organizations and farmers
- Work with local and state governments, institutions such as Colorado State University, and private growers to identify partners and potential funding
- Research and develop business models for a shared use facility

In western Colorado, over 3 million pounds of produce does not make its way to market annually.\(^{14}\)
Forty percent of food that is produced for consumption in the United States is wasted each year. This statistic includes food that is never harvested or brought to market due to imperfections, as well as food items that sit too long in consumer refrigerators and end up spoiling. According to the National Resources Defense Council (NRDC), this equates to between 125 and 160 billion pounds of food in the United States that is uneaten. Mesa County would like to focus on several aspects of this food waste continuum, specifically how to expand food recovery efforts beyond grocery stores to include institutions that prepare meals that end up as surplus or expired (hospital and college cafeterias, catering events, restaurants).

While many people in our community are driven to make a difference by organizing food drives or volunteering for a food pantry, people also care about wasting food that is perfectly good. In 2018, a local group of women, Great Old Broads for Wilderness, surveyed what was disposed of in the Mesa County Landfill over a two-week period. The survey showed that 68% of landfill deposits were divertible, deemed reusable, recyclable or compostable. Of this divertible waste, over 12% was food waste. We hope to raise awareness about this issue and garner support for food recovery, both in terms of feeding hungry people and being better stewards of our resources as a community.
GOAL 4

STRATEGIES:

1. **Support the grocery rescue infrastructure**, redirecting substantial amounts of grocery items to hunger relief organizations
2. **Expand food recovery efforts**, keeping food from large institutions from going into the landfill, and redirecting these foods to hunger relief
3. **Expand awareness about the opportunities of addressing hunger while reducing food waste**

**ACTION STEPS to expand and systematize food recovery and grocery rescue efforts**

1. **Support the grocery rescue infrastructure**

*Increase the efficiency and sustainability of grocery rescue.*

Grocery rescue is well-organized in Mesa County, with food items donated by a variety of stores of all sizes (from 7-Elevens to larger stores like Safeway) to food pantries. Though much work is being done already in grocery rescue, there are opportunities to better streamline a pick-up and delivery structure to support both grocery rescue and food recovery efforts.

- Support food pantry efforts to identify new sources of food, ensure regular safe handling protocols and compliance with Good Samaritan laws, and coordinate/facilitate pick-up and delivery logistics
- Invest in shared infrastructure, including refrigerated trucks, equipment for palletizing and moving large quantities of food, electronic systems to track the food, systems for managing food storage and distribution, and potentially paid staff
- Ensure food pantries and other hunger relief sites have adequate cold storage, temperature control instruments and other tools to allow them to receive and hold more fresh/prepared foods for hunger relief
- Build and brand a community-wide Mesa County food recovery network effort, creating a model that builds off of current infrastructure, while enhancing and streamlining it
2 Expand food recovery efforts

**Divert surplus foods from restaurants and larger institutions to hunger relief organizations.**

District 51’s Food and Nutrition Services estimates that 35% of food that is prepared each day ends up being thrown away. Prepared food that has been served on trays cannot be recovered; however, items that are wrapped, unopened, or have a peel (fruits) can be recovered. District 51 began a Snack Station pilot in 2019 in five elementary schools, recovering foods to provide as healthy snacks to students between meals. In addition, there are a dozen food preparation institutions in Mesa County that might be encouraged to join food recovery efforts, with Colorado Mesa University Dining Services and St. Mary’s Regional Hospital already participating. While food waste is less of an issue for restaurants, there is some food waste that might be recovered for hunger relief, if pickup and delivery of restaurant leftovers could be done economically.

- Expand District 51’s Snack Station Pilot to more schools as feasible
- Consider efficient options for pick-up and delivery of small volumes of restaurant food in this system
- Explore long-term options for portioning prepared meals into individual servings and ready-to-eat frozen meals available for clients. Potential access to a commercial kitchen space (Goal 1) or a facility with individual quick freeze capacities would support this action item (Goal 3)

3 Expand awareness about the opportunities of addressing hunger while reducing food waste

**Provide education on the various ways in which diverting food waste from the landfill is beneficial to our community.**

- Expand awareness in the broader community about food waste and the intersection between food recovery and hunger to attract more interest in local efforts and resources for implementation
GOAL 5: Increase public awareness that hunger is an issue in western Colorado which affects the whole community

CONTEXT AND DISCUSSION

Hunger is an individual and family problem. People who are hungry have more health problems, are less productive as students in school or as employees at work, and, more generally, lead lives of less comfort, security, and wellbeing. Research studies and data show a strong correlation between adequate nutrition and positive health and mental health outcomes, early childhood development, school readiness and success in classroom learning, economic stability and potential earning power, and overall well-being across the span of a lifetime.

Hunger is also a community problem. When there is a prevalence of food insecurity in our schools and workplaces, in our neighborhoods and the community, social problems and healthcare costs to our community increase. Hungry children cause more disruption in school classrooms, affecting the educational experience of all students. Employees who call in sick and are absent impact productivity in the workplace.

Aside from the moral imperative that people should not be hungry in America - the land of plenty - food insecurity has strong economic impacts that negatively impact communities. There are costs to hunger, both to the individual and to society. According to a study funded by Sodexo Foundation, the economic burden of hunger in the United States amounts to over $90 billion annually. Some of these costs include reduced educational attainment and lifelong earning power, considerable health care costs related to hunger, and the total costs of supporting a hunger relief system to address the needs of the hungry population.

STRATEGIES:

1. **Broaden stakeholders and engagement** to expand public understanding and awareness that food insecurity is an issue that affects the whole community

2. **Create public support and political will to address hunger** through various messaging channels and widespread engagement
**GOAL 5**

**ACTION STEPS to increase public awareness that hunger is an issue in Western Colorado that impacts the whole community**

1. **Broaden stakeholders and engagement**

Take concrete steps to increase public awareness of the issues hunger brings.

Highlight the public health, educational and economic benefits of nutrition programs. Convey who is hungry, addressing the fact that anyone can fall on hard times. Increase empathy through public awareness that many households depend on stable paychecks to ensure there is enough food in the house.

- Utilize the *No One Should Go Hungry* public awareness campaign, developed by Mesa County Public Health and Hilltop, to decrease the stigma related to accessing food assistance

- Develop public service announcements targeted to the general public and audiences from all sectors (educators, community leaders, human resource personnel, etc.) to elevate hunger as an important issue in Mesa County

- Maximize use of public spaces and vehicles to spread awareness that hunger is here and our community can help address the problem; for future mobile programs addressing food insecurity, create strong branding and messaging for vehicles, treating them like moving billboards

- Utilize the screenings and research conducted by the Accountable Health Communities Model (AHCM) and University of Colorado’s Drs. Nederveld and Broaddus to better share gaps in services, utilize processes to connect people with resources, and engage the community in innovative programs to address hunger.\(^{18}\)

2. **Create public support and political will to address hunger**

Ensure that the economic and health impacts of hunger and food access are integrated into community development, city, and county planning efforts.

- Engage civic leaders regarding the importance of creating a food secure community, thereby ensuring low-income regions have adequate access to grocery stores and food pantries, eliminating food deserts

- Work with public transit to ensure bus stops are close to food pantries, as well as to grocery stores
The Mesa County Hunger Alliance and its key member organizations have a lot of work to do. Priority projects to move forward include those projects that have the most impact in terms of reaching the most people. Two specific capital projects have been identified and are being implemented; they set the stage for expansion and improvement of services to key constituents. The Western Colorado Community Foundation, serving as fiscal agent for the Mesa County Hunger Alliance, received a two-year implementation grant from The Colorado Health Foundation in October 2020 to move forward with these goals.

1. Support and expansion of **SNAP Ambassador Pilot Program** and mobile outreach efforts as well as new initiatives to reduce stigma of food assistance programs

2. Support and expansion of **District 51’s Food and Nutrition Services projects** that provide more healthy, nutritious meals and snacks, reduce cafeteria waste and expand summer meal programs

3. Support **Community Food Bank’s new facility and strategic plan** to move to a client choice model, offer more fresh foods, and provide value-added services to clients of the food pantry

4. Continue to explore **sharing of facilities, staff, delivery vehicles, and other assets** so hunger relief organizations are strengthened and have adequate resources to fulfill their missions

5. Support relocation and **expansion of Mesa County Meals on Wheels**, including a new commercial kitchen and expanded administrative offices

6. Support an emerging **Mesa County Food Recovery Network** with vehicles, paid drivers, etc.
MOVING BEYOND EMERGENCY/SHORT-TERM NEEDS

Mesa County’s Blueprint to End Hunger has a sharp focus on improving the systems and effectiveness of emergency and short-term relief for those in our community who struggle with hunger. Ultimately, hunger is a symptom of poverty. If people had more income and could provide for their own families’ needs, they could take care of such basic needs as food and shelter. Longer term, the community would like to address the underlying issues that create the problem of hunger in the first place.

Two simple-to-grasp and hard-to-achieve goals would shape these future efforts:

**SHORTEN THE FOOD LINE**

Hunger relief staff and volunteers and anti-hunger advocates make a distinction between meeting the immediate needs of those who are hungry (serve the people in the food line) and working to address the longer-term issues that create the hunger problem (people who are unable to work or can only find part-time work, working poor families whose wages don’t cover all the basic needs of the household). These efforts are metaphorically embraced as shortening the food line – of helping people gain skills and secure gainful employment, of providing more livable wages, etc.

The emphasis of the Mesa County Blueprint to End Hunger is on the immediate needs of hungry people. Longer term, our community is committed to addressing the underlying issues of poverty and gainful employment so that people who want to work and can work can also provide for the basic needs of their families.

**FULL TUMMIES FIRST**

Homeless and affordable housing advocates have a commitment: Housing First. The premise is that people who are in difficult situations (homeless, hungry, with drug addiction or mental health problems, fleeing from dangerous home situations) need to be stable and have their basic needs met (food and shelter) in order to provide a basic level of stability. Only from a place of stability – of not being scared or hungry or wondering where to sleep at night – can people move on to setting goals and taking action steps to improve their life situations.

JOIN US IN ENDING HUNGER

Hunger relief organizations and community leaders alike are excited about the plans and opportunities outlined in this Blueprint to better address the needs of those in our community who face hunger. We look forward to moving forward in implementing these plans, as opportunities and funding allow. Food, like shelter, is a basic need and one that should not be a struggle for our neighbors. We look for broad community support and a commitment to end hunger in Mesa County in the months and years ahead.


4 Mesa County Community Health Needs Assessment, 2018-2020, p.94, Mesa County Public Health.


6 Data USA, Mesa County, CO, 2018. https://datausa.io/profile/geo/mesa-county-co


13 Colorado State University Extension, Community Alliance, Farm-to-Foodbank. https://communityalliance.extension.colostate.edu/vegetable-production/


18 Nederveld A, Broadbuds E. Developing an Intervention to Increase Understanding of Food Insecurity, University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus, 2020. https://drive.google.com/file/d/153JLa9Qr4okF3yji17xfi-7yFfG8HazG/view?usp=sharing
HUNGER IS A REAL PROBLEM IN MESA COUNTY

HUNGER IN COLORADO

1 in 10
Coloradans don’t know where they will get their next meal.

That is true for 1 in 6 Colorado kids.

HUNGER IN MESA COUNTY

An estimated
20,780
in our county are experiencing hunger.

WHAT CAN HELP?

Hunger is an issue that impacts educational, health, economic, and wellbeing outcomes for our neighbors and every community in our state. One of the most effective and proven ways of addressing hunger and improving health outcomes is to ensure that all Coloradans can access nutritious food they need. That access will also have a positive impact on the economy. For example, each county resident receiving federal help in accessing food will bring about $2,800 in local economic development per year, supporting local businesses and local jobs.

COLORADO’S OPPORTUNITY

WIC: 100,000 Coloradans eligible but not enrolled

SNAP: 322,600 Coloradans eligible but not enrolled

MESA COUNTY’S OPPORTUNITY

WIC: 3,957 eligible but not enrolled

SNAP: 18,735 eligible but not enrolled

WHAT ELSE CAN BE DONE?

- Support local school districts in expanding access to lunches, breakfasts and summer meal programs for all kids so they have the fuel to live, learn, and play
- Encourage local development of grocery stores where residents struggle for access
- Build and support local pipelines that get fresh, healthy food in the hands of Coloradans in need
- Strengthen the capacity and efficiency of local food banks and food pantries to reach underserved Coloradans

Learn more about statewide efforts at endhungerco.org
Visit endhungermesaco.org for an electronic version of this document