

Bring the Harvest Home



Hunger in Idaho and
what state leaders can do about it

Northwest
Federation of
Community
Organizations



Idaho Community Action Network (ICAN)

September 2001

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what state leaders can do about it

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Idaho Community Action Network (ICAN)

Northwest Federation of Community Organizations (NWFCO)

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary	page 4
Introduction	page 6
Section One: Idaho families do not have access to nutritious, affordable food	page 7
Idaho's economy is not creating jobs that pay a living wage and prevent poverty	page 7
Housing and energy costs in Idaho are rising	page 8
The lack of living wage jobs, high poverty levels, and increased costs of living has resulted in large numbers of hungry families in Idaho	page 8
Hunger causes irreparable harm to children	page 10
Section Two: Food banks in Idaho cannot meet the growing need for food assistance in the state	page 11
Section Three: Idaho can help hungry families by strengthening the Food Stamp Program, repealing the grocery tax, and creating a "Family Survival Package"	page 12
Solution One: Strengthen the Food Stamp Program	page 12
<i>Local food stamp offices can improve the Food Stamp Program by reducing barriers to access</i>	page 13
<i>The State Department of Health and Welfare can take steps to strengthen the Food Stamps Program at no cost to the state</i> ...	page 15
<i>Idaho's Senator Mike Crapo can work to improve the Food Stamp Program at the national level</i>	page 17
Solution Two: Repeal the Grocery Sales Tax	page 20
Solution Three: Family Survival Package	page 21
Conclusion	page 22
Endnotes	page 23

Executive Summary

“I have congestive heart failure, coronary artery disease, and an ulcer. On top of all that, I am an insulin-dependent diabetic. I need to eat a low-fat, low-sodium, low-sugar diet. That means a lot of fresh produce, lean meats, and high fiber grains. The \$133 a month I receive in food stamps is hardly enough to feed my two teenage boys and buy my special health diet. I have to make my food money stretch, and cheap bulk food is not necessarily what I need to be eating, but it’s all that I can afford to put in our stomachs. I appreciate all the help that food stamps provides, but I just wish that I could get a little bit more so that I could feed my boys and myself healthy meals.”

— Jane Romich, disabled widow and mother of two teenage boys
Boise, Idaho

Low-income families in Idaho are struggling. They are struggling to find jobs that pay a living wage. They are struggling to pay rising utility, housing, and health care costs. Most importantly, low-income families in Idaho are struggling to put food on their tables. The result of failing to provide balanced, nutritious meals for an entire family is succumbing to the dangerous condition known as hunger.

Across the country and throughout Idaho there exist programs and institutions aimed at alleviating and preventing hunger in low-income families. Food banks have traditionally been the sole source for many low-income families searching for emergency food assistance. However, more and more families are finding hunger and food insecurity to be more than just a short-term emergency, it’s becoming a long-term, epidemic problem. For food banks across the U.S. and Idaho, this means that low-income families are utilizing the food resources of the food bank faster than they can be replaced. Many families are now being turned away at food banks because there is not enough food to go around to all who are hungry.

The most important hunger-prevention tool in Idaho, however, is the long-established Food Stamp Program. In 1999 the program was able to relieve hunger for over 23,000 families in Idaho. Nearly all families receiving food stamps officially live in poverty, which means that they have insufficient income to meet their basic needs. Without access to the Food Stamp Program, these families would have a difficult time obtaining the food and nutrition they need to stay healthy.

Although the Food Stamp Program provides thousands of Idaho families with vital access to food, Idaho has failed to enroll many eligible families who desperately need access to reliable nutrition. In fact, Idaho’s food stamp participation rate is the fifth worst in the country. An act by Congress in 1996 also limited the number of people who could qualify for benefits by exempting legal immigrants and unemployed single people from receiving food stamp benefits. The 1996 law also reduced the value of the food stamp benefit level. Emerging from the rubble of the 1996 Congressional act was a Food Stamp Program that provides insufficient food assistance for families,

eliminates families in need of food assistance based on citizenship, erects barriers to access for families enrolling in the program, and creates a level of administrative fear for state Food Stamp Program agencies.

Idaho Community Action Network (ICAN) surveyed 134 low-income families for this report to assess the struggles families endure to provide healthy meals. ICAN surveyed an additional 35 families assessing their access to required food stamp deductions and their use of hunting and fishing as a source of food. The families were interviewed regarding how they obtain and prepare food, their ability to meet their families' food needs, and their experiences with the Food Stamp Program. These 169 in-depth interviews with low-income families in Idaho revealed that these families are struggling to provide the nutritious and affordable meals they need.

The studies finding include:

- Close to 60 percent of families could only provide a balanced breakfast, lunch, and/or dinner at most three times a week.
- More than half of the adults surveyed said they did not have enough money to buy food to last for an entire month.
- Seventy-two percent of adults and 40 percent of children on food stamps stated they have eaten less or skipped meals in the past twelve months due to a lack of food.
- Nearly all food stamp families reported difficulties when they applied for the Food Stamp Program.
- Between one-quarter to one-half of food stamp families report not being asked important deduction questions when applying for food stamps.
- Almost all of the families who reported using hunting and fishing as a source of food said the hunting and fishing licenses and tags were unaffordable.

Bring Home the Harvest presents clear, achievable policy solutions that local food stamp agencies and the Department of Health and Welfare can adopt to improve and streamline the Food Stamp Program. State leaders can also reduce hunger by repealing the statewide grocery sales tax and creating a low-cost hunting and fishing survival package. Both of these options would allow Idaho families to participate in alternative ways of securing food and increasing their purchasing power.

In addition, Mike Crapo should work to improve the Food Stamp Program by: increasing the value of food stamp benefits, expanding eligibility to include more working families, restoring benefits to legal immigrants and the unemployed, and reforming the federal Quality Control system to give states greater flexibility and more financial incentive to better serve eligible families. Only Congress has the power to implement these changes to the Food Stamp Program. Idaho's Senator Mike Crapo is an influential member of the Senate Agricultural Committee, the committee responsible for improving the Food Stamp Program.

The improvement of the state and federal Food Stamp Program, a repeal of the state grocery tax, and the creation of a low-cost hunting and fishing survival package are straightforward policy solutions Idaho can implement to eliminate hunger for all low-income Idaho families.

Introduction

Idaho is facing a problem experienced by many other Western states. Wages are either declining or stagnating, the cost of living is increasing, and more and more families are being forced into poverty. When a family falls prey to poverty, it also falls prey to hunger as well. For years, the federal Food Stamp Program has been at the heart of America's war against hunger. However, the effectiveness of the Food Stamp Program has been damaged in recent years by federal changes made in 1996 which cut \$28 billion dollars from the program.

For low-income Idaho families, these cuts in the Food Stamp Program have resulted in an endless array of barriers and difficulties when applying and enrolling for the program. With Idaho's hunger rate climbing to over 10 percent of the population — higher than the national average — a strengthened Food Stamp Program is the most important step in preventing hunger in low-income families. Improvements, however, must occur at the local, state, and federal levels to ensure that Idaho families have access to the food stamps they need to avoid hunger. In addition to improving the Food Stamp Program, Idaho can also reduce hunger in the state by repealing the state grocery sales tax and creating a low-cost hunting and fishing survival package.

These three straight forward solutions — improving the Food Stamp Program, repealing the grocery tax, and creating a low-cost family hunting and fishing package — are solutions that Idaho can adopt to eliminate hunger in Idaho. This report will outline each of these three policy solutions.

Section one of the report shows that Idaho families do not have access to sufficient nutritious, affordable food. It relies on data collected from ICAN's survey administered to 134 families throughout Idaho as well as data from government sources to show that many families are going without needed food.

Section two shows that food banks in Idaho cannot meet the growing need for long term food assistance in low-income families.

Section three of the report provides three solutions that Idaho can implement to help hungry families. The first and most important solution Idaho can implement is strengthening the Food Stamp Program. Idaho can strengthen the Food Stamp Program by taking action at three different levels: local food stamp agencies can reduce barriers to access, Idaho's Department of Health and Welfare can implement streamlining options, and Idaho's Senator Mike Crapo can work to improve the Food Stamp Program during the upcoming reauthorization.

Section three also presents two additional solutions that can assist hungry families in Idaho. The second solution is to repeal Idaho's state grocery tax. The third solution is the creation of a "Family Survival Package" for those low-income families who hunt and/or fish for food.

Section I: Idaho families do not have access to nutritious, affordable food

Idaho's state economy is failing to create jobs that provide a living wage to all workers. Housing, utility, and food prices in Idaho are rising beyond the capacity of many low-income families monthly budgets. Declining real wages combined with rising costs of living forces Idaho families to choose between which basic needs to satisfy and which to forgo. For many low-income Idaho families, this means going hungry or surviving on food that does not meet minimum nutritional standards.

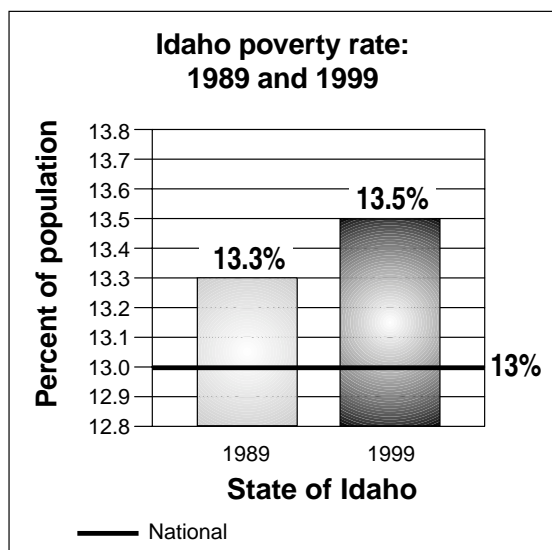
Idaho's economy is not creating jobs that pay a living wage and prevent poverty.

The most important source of income for all Idaho families is the income derived from employment. For Idaho families, it is crucial that working family members make a wage that provides all the basic needs without resorting to public assistance. This wage is called a "living wage," which in Idaho is equivalent to making \$14.98 an hour or more for a single adult with two children. According to the 2001 Northwest Job Gap Study, 75 percent of all job openings in Idaho do not pay this living wage.¹ For every one job opening in Idaho that provides a living wage, there are eight job seekers competing for that job. In addition, inflation-adjusted wages in 1999 declined between five and 8.5 percent since 1979.²

Idaho lacks living wage job opportunities	
Living wage	\$14.98
Job openings failing to provide a living wage	75%
Living wage job gap ratio	8 job seekers for 1 living wage job opening

Personal incomes of Idaho families are not stacking up to the national average. In 1999 Idaho families made 80 percent of the national average income. Rural counties fared even worse, with Lewis county residents only earning 66 percent of the national average and Bear Lake county residents only earning 54 percent.³ According to the Economic Policy Institute, 33 percent of Idaho jobs in 1999 paid below the wage needed to lift a family of four above the poverty line with full-time work, year round.⁴

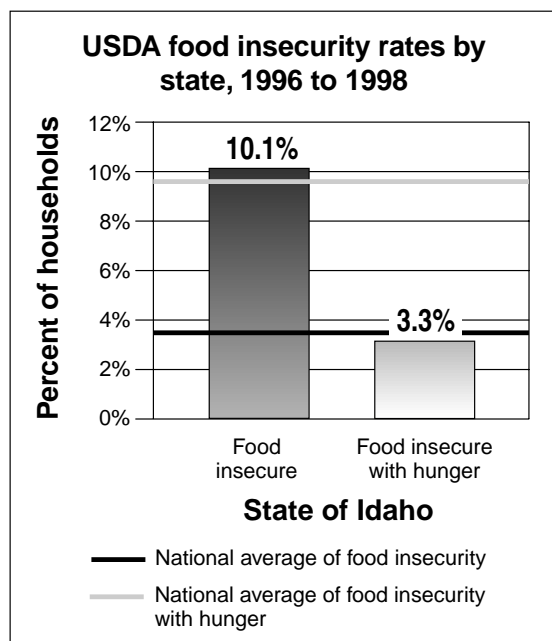
When real wages in Idaho fail to provide the income needed to cover a family's basic cost of living, a family is often forced into poverty. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, a family of four with income lower than \$17,650 in 2001 was officially living "in poverty," although most people consider families with incomes considerably higher than \$17,650 to be living in poverty.⁵ Idaho's poverty rate continues to surpass the national average and has grown from 13.3 percent in 1989 to 13.5 percent in 1999.⁶ One in every five children in Idaho lives in poverty.⁷



Housing and energy costs in Idaho are rising.

A significant factor contributing to a family falling into poverty is rising housing and utility costs. Housing costs are taking up a larger portion of low-income families' budgets. According to the National Low Income Housing Coalition, an Idaho family with a two-bedroom house had to earn \$9.25 an hour just to pay for their housing costs in 2000.⁸ In order to keep a roof over their heads, many families are forced to make sacrifices such as eating less or not paying a utility bill.

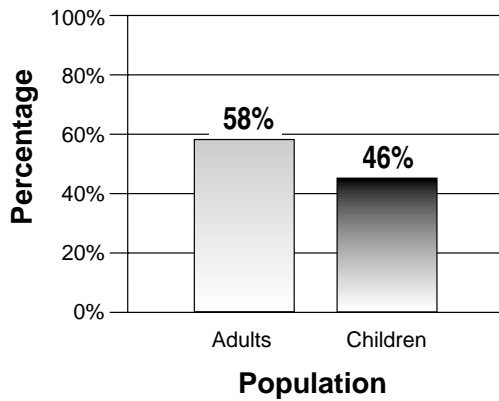
Low-income families in Idaho are also being squeezed by higher energy costs. In May 2001, the Idaho Public Utilities Commission approved a rate increase for Idaho Power to cover a \$168.3 million shortfall in energy costs from the previous year. The Public Utilities Commission estimated the average residential consumer would see an increase of 18.4 percent, or about \$12 a month.⁹ Although low-income households often consume less energy than the average household does, the income burden of energy costs on those households is almost twice that of average households.¹⁰ Rising energy and housing prices squeeze family budgets, leaving them with less money to spend on food.



The lack of living wage jobs, high poverty levels, and increased costs of living has resulted in large numbers of hungry families in Idaho.

With real wages declining and the cost of living increasing in Idaho, many low-income families are having to reduce the amount of food they eat in order to afford other costs of living. For many low-income families across Idaho, this means succumbing to the dangers of hunger. Nationally, families living below the federal poverty line (\$17,650 for a family of four) are three and half times more likely to be food insecure than the general population.¹¹ Households with children also experience higher food insecurity rates than those without children; they are twice as likely to be food insecure. In Idaho, the USDA reports that 10.1 percent of the population are food insecure. Idaho's level of food insecurity exceeds the national average of 9.7 percent.¹²

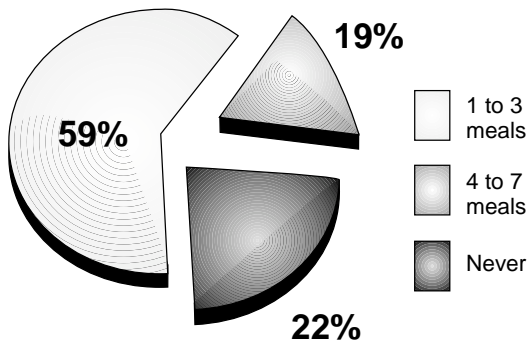
Percentage of people in Idaho who went hungry last month because they had no money for food



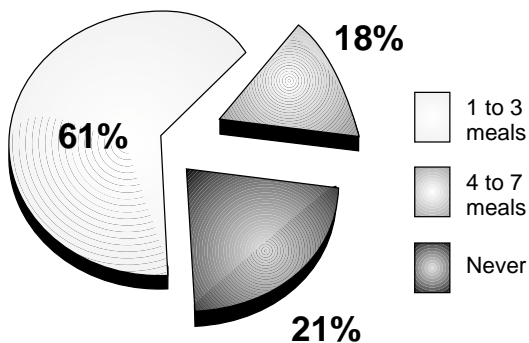
ICAN's survey of 134 Idaho families confirms that a large proportion of low-income families suffer from hunger.

- Fifty-eight percent of adults and 46 percent of children said they were hungry in the previous month because their family didn't have enough money to buy food.
- Sixty percent of adults and 33 percent of children had skipped a meal or eaten less at least once in the previous 12 months because there was not enough money to buy food.
- Between 57 percent and 62 percent of families surveyed said they could only afford to provide balanced, nutritious breakfasts, lunches, or dinners at most 3 times a week. More than 20 percent of those surveyed said they could never afford to provide a balanced, nutritious breakfast or lunch during the week.

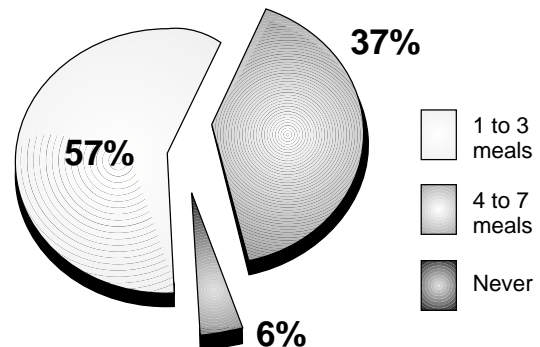
Number of times per week Idaho families can afford to eat breakfast



Number of times per week Idaho families can afford to eat lunch



Number of times per week Idaho families can afford to eat dinner



Hunger causes irreparable harm to children.

Hunger harms children in many ways beyond the immediate misery it causes. Health problems are frequent among children who face hunger.¹³ Hungry children suffer two to four times as many health problems, including unwanted weight loss, fatigue, headaches, and irritability. Hunger also causes children to suffer from frequent colds and difficulty concentrating. Inadequate nutrition is also linked to stunted growth and iron deficiency anemia.

Hunger and poor nutrition affect a child's ability to learn and perform in school. This can have life-long consequences for the child and society. Children who are hungry have difficulty concentrating in school and do not do as well as others on assigned tasks. Inadequate nutrition also has a negative effect on a child's cognitive development. A 1998 study of low-income Philadelphia and Baltimore public elementary schools found that the teachers of hungry children reported higher levels of hyperactivity, absenteeism, and tardiness.¹⁴ The study found that when these schools implemented the School Breakfast Program, children's participation in the program led to greater achievement in math and decreased rates of absence and tardiness. Teens and adults who suffered from hunger when they were young are more aggressive and become frustrated more easily than those who didn't suffer from hunger as children.¹⁵ Food deprivation is also related to depression and anxiety.

Section II: Food Banks in Idaho cannot meet the growing need for food assistance in the state

Low-income families in Idaho need a helping hand to put enough nutritious food on their tables. Hungry low-income families in Idaho are increasingly relying on food banks as a primary source of food. In 2000, the Idaho Food Bank distributed 4.3 million pounds of food, a 26 percent increase from 1999.¹⁶ Idaho is not alone, food bank operators across the Northwest confirm that record numbers of people are seeking emergency food assistance at food banks.¹⁷

While food banks play an important role in assisting people with temporary emergency food needs, they lack the resources and capabilities to provide food to hungry families on a long-term basis. The increased use of food banks by low-income families has resulted in food banks turning away hungry families due to a lack of resources. America's Second Harvest, the nation's largest food bank network, reports that in 2000, over one million people seeking emergency food assistance were turned away due to lack of food resources at local food banks.¹⁸ Second Harvest also notes that, "At the same time that demand for hunger relief is increasing, food banks and charities are unable to meet all the demand."

Dixie Saunders, Director of Services at the Community Ministries food bank in Boise noted that Idaho food banks are struggling to feed those who need help. Saunders reports dramatic increases in Idaho food bank participation by people of all age groups: seniors, disabled people, and families with and without children. She also notes that many of the families receiving food from Community Ministries have two working family members, and many individuals who receive food from the food bank are working two or more jobs.¹⁹

*Roger Simon, Executive Director of the Boise, Idaho, Food Bank said, "Food stamp recipients run out of food during the last week of the month and come to us for help. But, based on our present donation level, we cannot meet the needs of our community alone. We should not have to either. The government, private corporations, and the non-profit sector must all come together to better our communities."*²⁰

Section III: Idaho can help hungry families by strengthening the Food Stamp Program, repealing the grocery tax, and creating a “Family Survival Package”

Food banks in Idaho should only be used as a resource for temporary emergency needs. They should not be relied upon or expected to be the sole provider of food for hungry low-income families in Idaho. In their place, Idaho needs to implement solutions that provide long-term food assistance to low-income families. This section presents three solutions Idaho can implement to help hungry families.

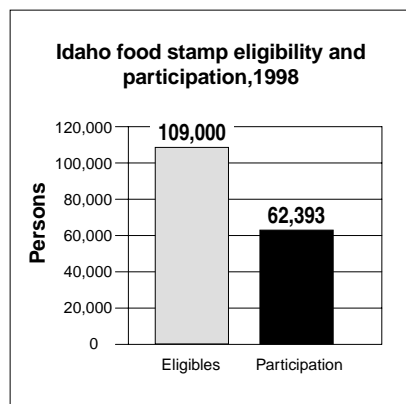
Solution one is to strengthen the federal Food Stamp Program. Idaho can strengthen the Food Stamp Program by taking action at three levels: the local level with food stamp agencies, the state level with the Department of Health and Welfare, and at the federal level with Idaho’s Senator Mike Crapo working improve the program during the upcoming reauthorization in Fall, 2001.

Solution two is to repeal Idaho’s state grocery tax. Idaho is one of only 18 states that continues to tax grocery items. For low-income families, grocery taxes take away a significant portion of income that could be used to buy nutritious food.

Solution three is the creation of a “Family Survival Package” for those low-income families who hunt and/or fish for food. This package would reduce the cost of expensive licenses and tags, giving low-income families the ability to use hunting and fishing as a source of food.

Solution 1: Strengthen the Food Stamp Program

In Idaho, as in many other Western states, the number of people receiving benefits through the Food Stamp Program has decreased. Since 1996, the number of Idaho families served by the Food Stamp Program has declined 24 percent. The average number of persons served by the program in Idaho declined 23 percent since 1996. Today, Idaho distributes 25 percent less benefits to hungry low-income families than it did in 1996.²¹



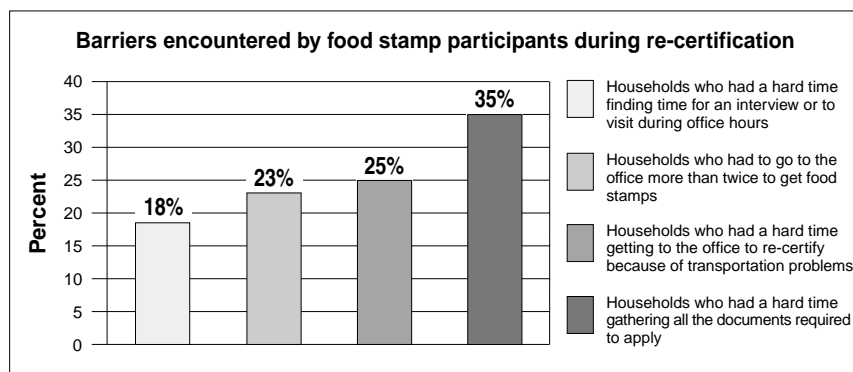
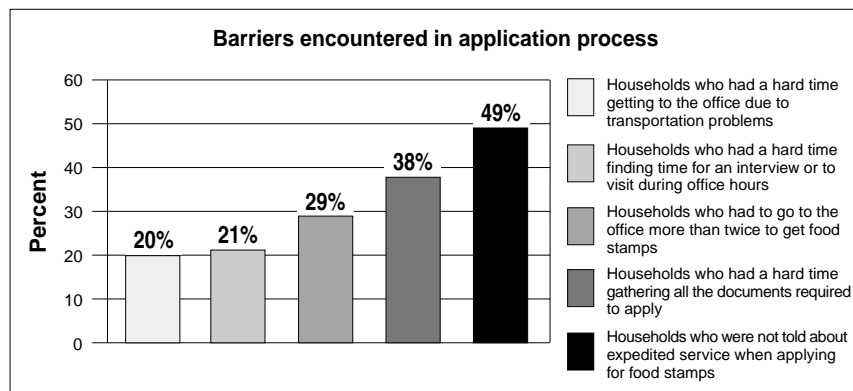
The decline in food stamp usage has occurred despite the increased use of food banks as a primary food source and despite many families still being eligible for the program. Eligibility and participation data from the USDA show that Idaho is enrolling a meager 57 percent of the eligible families in the state, the fifth worst enrollment rate in the country.²² Idaho has never enrolled all eligible families into the Food Stamp Program, but over the last several years, the gap in Idaho has become worse. The eligible families not enrolled in the program represent a *need gap* — they are likely in need of food assistance because their income is near or below the poverty line, but they aren’t getting the help they need from the Food Stamp Program.

Reducing and eliminating this need gap can only come through strengthening the Food Stamp Program. Strengthening the Food Stamp Program for low-income families in Idaho needs to be approached at three levels: local, state, and federal. Strengthening the program at each level requires implementing different solutions to different barriers and problems and engaging a variety of different decision makers.

Local food stamp offices can improve the Food Stamp Program by reducing barriers to access.

The source of the need gap at the local level in Idaho comes from barriers in the enrollment and application process that discourages or prevents families from applying for benefits. In order for the Food Stamp Program to live up to its mission to protect the health and well being of Idaho's families, these barriers in the enrollment process must be eliminated.

Families that responded to the ICAN survey described many difficulties navigating the application process. They explained that the current rules make the application process so complicated and time-consuming that it is not a practical option for some families. In many low-income households, every parent is working full-time. Many parents who qualify for food stamps are working two or more jobs. For these households, it is not possible to repeatedly meet with caseworkers during limited office hours so enrollment is impossible. Other families face similar barriers such as unclear instructions, lack of support, and excessive verification requirements. All of these barriers keep eligible families out of the program and depress participation rates.



Local food stamp agencies in Idaho can take the following steps in eradicating the barriers identified in the ICAN survey.

Aggressively use all food stamp deductions. A crucial determining factor for a family applying for food stamps are deductions that are subtracted from their income. The more a family is legally able to deduct when applying for food stamps, the more benefits they can receive. ICAN surveyed 35 current food stamp recipients in Idaho regarding whether or not they were asked questions about certain deductions when applying for the program.

- Fifty percent reported not being asked if they have legal child support obligations outside their household.
- Fifty percent reported not being asked if they have non-reimbursable medical expenses for a disabled or elderly person in their household.
- Forty-three percent reported not being asked how much mortgage, mortgage insurance, and property taxes they have.
- Thirty-nine percent reported not being asked if they have any child care or adult care costs while at work.
- Twenty-eight percent reported not being asked if someone in their family is disabled or over the age of 60.

The correct calculation of these deductions can mean the difference between a family receiving benefits or being rejected from the program. Correctly calculating these deductions can also mean a significant improvement in the benefits a hungry Idaho families receive.

Assist families with completing applications. Thirty-five percent of surveyed food stamp recipients in Idaho reported difficulty in gathering all the documents for the program. Current federal law requires agencies in Idaho to provide assistance in the completion of application forms. This means that an enrollment worker should assist the household in verification of documents and in obtaining required documents. Agencies in Idaho must also allow applicants 10 days to gather all the required documents. Idaho must ensure that these requirements are met for each applicant.

Provide expedited service to all eligible families. Forty-nine percent of food stamp recipients in Idaho reported not being told about the expedited service program. Federal law requires Idaho agencies to talk with each household during the application process to determine whether the household qualifies for expedited services. This service was created to ensure that families in crisis would receive food stamp benefits right away so they could quickly obtain food. Idaho should ensure that its local offices meet this requirement.

Expand office hours at application sites. One out of five food stamp recipients surveyed by ICAN had difficulty finding time for an interview or going to the food stamp office during office hours. To alleviate this problem, application sites in Idaho should remain open in the evenings and should open on Saturdays. Applicants working full-time or more should not have to choose between meeting job

obligations and applying for food stamps. Caseworkers should also promptly reschedule missed appointments and accept walk-in applicants.

Provide translators for all applicants who need the service. Providing translation would reduce the amount of time caseworkers spend with applicants and reduce the frustration for both caseworkers and families. Providing translators would decrease the number of visits families make to the office and streamline the application process. In the meantime, agencies in Idaho should follow existing law, which requires that they provide bilingual information and materials and have interpreters in localities where five percent of low-income residents speak a particular language other than English.

The State Department of Health and Welfare can take steps to strengthen the Food Stamps Program at no cost to the state.

The federal government has provided Idaho and the Idaho State Department of Health and Welfare the freedom to design its Food Stamp Program by implementing a variety of state options. Many of these options could be implemented at no cost to the state. These options can streamline Idaho's Food Stamp Program to reduce error rates, improve access, eliminate barriers, and save the state money. Unfortunately, Idaho has chosen not to exercise these options. Idaho is free to make all of the following changes that are suggested below. Adopting these policies will help ensure that all eligible families receive the food stamp benefits they need.

Allow applicants to self-verify information for food stamps. Documentation problems make every kind of barrier more onerous for families. Each time the applicant is required to produce more documents or acquire verification for documents, the problems they have with transportation, office hours, and taking time from work or family are exacerbated. Idaho should follow the model of their state Medicaid program and allow recipients to self-verify required information.

Expand the number and variety of venues for food stamp enrollment. Idaho should provide out-station sites or mobile vans to bring application sites closer to families with limited transportation options. Bringing the application sites closer to applicants can reduce travel time for applicants and reduce the time applicants have to take from family and work.

Utilize co-enrollment by using information from other means-tested programs. Many means-tested programs such as the school lunch program have income eligibility levels that overlap with food stamps eligibility levels. These programs can be an effective vehicle for identifying families eligible for the Food Stamp Program. Idaho should expand current programs which allow other means-tested programs to share a family's information (with consent) with Idaho's Food Stamp Program. This can save families and caseworkers time and effort, and increase outreach to eligible families.

Institute a three-month transitional benefit for families leaving welfare. Congress has passed into law a provision that gives Idaho the option of implementing an automatic three-month transitional benefit for those who leave welfare. Currently, many in Idaho who leave welfare assume that they are

no longer eligible for food stamps, even though they may need assistance. Implementing the automatic transitional benefit helps families to stay off welfare. This freedom from additional bureaucratic hurdles would be particularly helpful to people adjusting to new work-related obligations.

Increase the Standard Utility Allowance. Utility costs in Idaho have risen to the point that the current state Standard Utility Allowances (SUAs) do not reflect the true costs of utilities. The SUA needs to be increased to reflect the sharp rise in gas and electricity this past year. An increased standard utility allowance that reflects real costs of utilities will increase the amount of benefits a family can receive and ensure that there is sufficient food.

Use existing ABAWD exemptions to provide food stamps to the unemployed. Each year Idaho is given a certain number of exemptions that it can give to unemployed families in counties with a high unemployment rate. These exemptions allow these families to receive food stamps beyond the three-month maximum in a three-year period, currently required under federal law. Idaho has a surplus of these exemptions and should designate them to all able-bodied, childless adults between the ages of 18 and 50 (called ABAWDs) in the entire state, regardless of eligibility.

Utilize and expand the use of categorical eligibility to make it easier for people to apply and receive food stamps and to eliminate complicated vehicle and asset tests. Idaho has the option of using the definition of categorical eligibility more broadly to allow more families to receive food stamps and to eliminate the vehicle and asset tests. For example, Oregon used categorically eligibility to eliminate the vehicle and assets test, which significantly reduced the amount of paperwork required to apply for food stamps. Oregon accomplished this by bringing the state's Food Stamp Program eligibility requirements in line with TANF eligibility requirements.



Rebecca Mee — Caldwell, Idaho

I have four children ages eleven months to 7 years. My husband, Patrick, changed jobs to benefit our family last year. He became partial owner of a business and our income has gone down considerably. We don't see a paycheck until the employees and all the bills are paid. In the long run we should be doing well, but right now our family of six is living on \$650 a month. It is impossible for me to get a job because any money I would earn would have to go for childcare costs. We are behind on all of our bills and had to turn our gas off in March because we couldn't afford it.

We qualify for food stamps and other assistance programs according to our income, but our eligibility was denied due to the value of our vehicle. We have a large, dependable van that suits the needs of our family that is valued at about \$9,900. Our caseworker at Health and Welfare has suggested that we find a dealership that will appraise it for less, but we have taken good care of it and haven't had any luck. To sell our van would be a loss for us and wouldn't make any sense because it is our only means of transportation. I am unable to feed my family a good balanced diet on my husband's income. Meat and fresh fruits and vegetables are impossible to afford without the help of food stamps. If only our van was not included as a part of our income, my family would be well fed.

Idaho's Senator Mike Crapo can work to improve the Food Stamp Program at the national level.

Idaho has the ability to eliminate many of the enrollment and application barriers for the Food Stamp Program at the local and state levels. However, because the Food Stamp Program is federally funded and run, Idaho's ability to make substantial change in the program is limited. The federal government has the power to make far-reaching changes in the administration of the Food Stamp Program that eliminates application and enrollment barriers.

In July 2001, the House Agricultural Committee authorized \$3.25 billion in new spending for the Food Stamp Program. Several significant improvements that will remove barriers to access and reward states for better serving eligible families were included in the House version of the bill. The Senate will begin deliberating their farm bill in the fall of 2001. Idaho's Senator Mike Crapo plays an influential role in the Senate Agricultural Committee and is a member of the Subcommittee on Research, Nutrition, and General Legislation, the subcommittee responsible for drafting legislation on food stamps. Beyond the changes at the state level, Idaho's Senator Mike Crapo can work to improve the Food Stamp Program by adopting the following changes:

Expand eligibility to 200 percent of Federal Poverty Line to include more working families.

Many working poor households do not meet the current guidelines for the Food Stamp Program but still have difficulty putting food on the table for their families. According to USDA, in 1999, one-fourth of working poor families did not always know where their next meal would come from.²⁴ The Food Stamp Program should mirror other income support programs like Medicaid and WIC in extending benefits to vulnerable working poor families with incomes higher than 100 percent of the federal poverty level.

Idaho's Senator Mike Crapo plays an influential role in the Senate Agricultural Committee and is a member of the Subcommittee on Research, Nutrition, and General Legislation, the subcommittee responsible for drafting legislation on food stamps.

Senator Mike Crapo can be contacted at:

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111 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510
Phone: (202) 224-6142
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Evaluate states on closing the need gap. At the root of many of the barriers preventing eligible people from receiving food stamps is the Quality Control system the USDA uses to evaluate states' performance in administering the program. The current system is a punitive one that imposes financial sanctions on states with error rates (the percentage of benefits delivered incorrectly) higher than the national average. For caseworkers and clients, this translates into burdensome application and verification procedures, requiring a great deal of paperwork and frequent visits to the food stamp office. The Quality Control system must be reformed to give states greater flexibility and financial incentives to better serve eligible families.

Increase benefit levels to reflect the real cost of food today. While food stamps provide much needed support to recipient households, current benefit levels are not high enough for many families. The average recipient in FY 2000 received less than \$73 a month in food stamps, which calculates out to be only 80 cents per meal.²³ Food banks around the country are serving growing numbers of food stamp recipients seeking food assistance when their food stamps run out. Benefit levels must be increased to adequately reflect the real cost of food and other expenses, as well as the realities of daily life for low-income families.

The average food stamp recipient in 2000 received less than \$73 a month in food stamps, which calculates out to be only 80 cents per meal."



Emily Jones — Garden City, Idaho

I live in a small trailer with my son, his wife, her 12-year-old daughter, and my eight-month-old grandbaby. I have a pace maker and I am unable to work due to my heart condition. My son has a mental disability and cannot have a job. He works on cars for a little bit of money, and his wife has a part-time job. All of their money goes to medical bills that they have accrued over the years. That means that the whole family is dependent on the \$800 that I receive every month from SSI and my widow's pension. I have

to pay for rent, utilities, loan repayments, and my over-the-counter drug costs with this money. After everything is paid for, I have very little money left over for food.

Fortunately, we get help from the food stamp program; unfortunately our family gets only \$10 a month in food stamps. That hardly buys anything! I'm supposed to be on a low-fat, low-sodium diet, but I can't afford all of the healthy foods that I should be eating. I never get fruits and vegetables, and neither do my grandchildren, because we cannot afford them on food stamps. My son and his wife try to help as much as they can with groceries, but we're just not able to get a healthy diet with the money that we have.

Restore benefits to legal immigrants and single adults without dependents. Legal immigrants were the largest group of needy households cut off completely from the Food Stamp Program in 1996. Since then, benefits have been restored to children, elderly and disabled immigrants who arrived before 1996, but millions of legal immigrants still remain ineligible for food stamps. Benefits must be restored to legal immigrants to ensure that all vulnerable households have access to adequate nutrition, regardless of citizenship status.

The 1996 law also severely compromised the entitlement structure of the program by limiting food stamp benefits to able-bodied adults without dependents, or ABAWDs, for only three months out of every 36 months while unemployed. This punishes individuals who are willing to work but who live in areas with high unemployment or are faced with barriers such as lack of adequate training. Food stamp benefits for ABAWDs must be restored federally to ensure that the nation's most important safety net against hunger is not compromised.



Maria Martinez* — Idaho

My husband and I have five children ages nine months to nine years. Only my husband works, and he is employed seasonally at temporary places. Last month he made \$1,170, but his monthly income varies, and he could make more or less than that. We are really struggling because we don't have enough money to buy sufficient food for our family. Oftentimes this forces us, and sometimes our children, to eat less or skip meals. Participating in the food program at ICAN has helped us a great deal, but it is not enough. I want to feel secure that my family will be full at every meal, every day.

We were informed about the Food Stamp Program through the Department of Health and Welfare. Unfor-

tunately, an INS employee told us that we were not able to apply for food stamps because our immigration status could be harmed. Right now my eldest son and I are in the process of legalizing our U.S. status and I do not want an application for food stamps to get in the way. However, my family is hungry and I do not feel that my children are getting the proper nutrition they need. They are young and need fresh fruits and vegetables to grow up healthy.

Right now I do not know what I am going to do. I am grateful for the food program at ICAN, but my family is still going hungry. We are in need of more assistance, but I just cannot see a way for us to get help from the government because of our immigration status.

* Name withheld by request.

Solution 2: Repeal the Grocery Sales Tax

Currently, Idaho is one of only 18 states that taxes their citizens for purchasing food products. Such taxation on food products can reduce a low-income family's purchasing power by five percent.²⁵ For Idaho families living on low and limited budgets, losing five percent of their income to grocery taxes represents a significant loss of money. A repeal of the grocery sales tax in Idaho would result in an additional \$20 per month available for low income families to purchase food.²⁶

Support for repealing the statewide grocery sales tax in Idaho has grown throughout the state. This year, however, the Idaho legislature rejected a proposal aimed at repealing the state grocery sales tax. Idaho state legislators instead implemented a plan that increased the grocery tax credit to \$5.²⁷ This plan is a poor substitute for a proposal that could have given low-income families in Idaho an additional \$240 a year to spend on food.

A repeal of the grocery sales tax in Idaho would result in an additional \$20 per month — or \$240 a year — available for low-income families to purchase food.



Jane Romich — Boise, Idaho

My name is Jane Romich, and I am a disabled widow with the responsibility of taking care of two teenage boys. I have a monthly income of \$583 in addition to receiving \$267 in child support for my grandsons. I have rent and utilities to pay for every month in addition to paying a debt to my bank and Social Security for an overpayment that they mistakenly made to me. Add that to a little money that I donate to my church and other miscellaneous costs that inevitably come up for a family, and I have very little money left over for food. We depend on our food stamp benefit for our grocery needs.

I have congestive heart failure, cardio artery disease, and an ulcer. On top of all that, I am an insulin-dependent diabetic. I need to eat a low-fat, low-sodium, low-sugar diet. That means a lot of fresh produce, lean meats, and high fiber grains. The \$133 a month I receive in food stamps is hardly enough to feed two teenage boys and a special health diet.

I have to make my food money stretch, and cheap bulk food is not necessarily what I need to be eating, but it's all that I can afford to put in our stomachs. I appreciate all the help that food stamps provide, but I just wish that I could get a little bit more so that I could feed my boys and myself healthy meals.

Solution 3: Family Survival Package

People from across the country flock to Idaho to hunt and fish in Idaho's great outdoors. At one time, many of Idaho's impoverished families relied upon our natural wildlife to supplement their family's food supply. Today, the constant increase in price of hunting and fishing licenses and tags has driven many low-income families out of the mountains and streams where they once hunted and fished to feed their families.

In addition to the survey documenting hunger in low-income families, ICAN also surveyed families in Idaho receiving food stamps on their fishing and hunting practices:

- Fifty-six percent of those surveyed stated that hunting and fishing were very necessary to meet their families' food needs.
- Ninety-three percent of those who fished and hunted for food, however, said that the current prices for hunting and fishing licenses and tags are unaffordable.

The key to encouraging low-income families in Idaho to use hunting and fishing as a source of food is to create a low cost "Family Survival Package." This package would include several hunting and fishing licenses and tags for different game and fish species and be offered at a reduced cost to low-income families only (at or below 150 percent of the federal poverty level). Ninety-four percent of those who hunt and/or fish for food commented that if fees were reduced, they would hunt and fish more often to supply food for their families. The "Family Survival Package" would be an important incentive in getting low-income families hunting and fishing for food again, decreasing their dependence on food stamps and food banks.

A key factor in the creation of the Family Survival Package is the issue of access. Low-income families should be able to apply and receive this package with ease, requiring very little verification, documentation, and travel. The Family Survival Package should be available at all state and local Idaho Department of Fish and Game offices. Low-income families with documented transportation and/or disability issues should be able to apply for and receive the package through the mail or over the phone. Those receiving TANF or Food Stamp benefits should automatically be eligible for the Family Survival Package. Idaho should also invest in outreach at TANF and Food Stamp Offices, requiring outreach and caseworkers to notify public assistance recipients of their eligibility for the package.

Conclusion

Low-income families in Idaho today struggle to stretch inadequate budgets to cover the rising costs of housing, utilities, and food. Too many Idaho families are forced to make the desperate choice to go hungry. Community-based solutions like food banks are important but cannot solve the hunger crisis alone. We know that hunger causes children and adults irreparable harm. Experience has shown that eliminating hunger can best be achieved by implementing new hunger-prevention programs and expanding and improving existing ones. For Idaho, this means improving the Food Stamp Program at both the state and national level, repealing the grocery tax, and creating a Family Survival Package.

The most effective solution to eliminating hunger in Idaho is to strengthen the Food Stamp Program. Idaho can take action on improving the program at three levels: local, state, and federal. Local solutions should be implemented at local food stamp offices and tackle barrier issues such as aggressively using all food stamp deductions and providing expedited service. State solutions should be implemented through Idaho's Department of Health and Welfare and focus on adopting no-cost federal options such as using categorical eligibility to increase eligibility and implementing a simplified recertification process. Implementing federal solutions will need the help of Idaho's Senator Mike Crapo, who can use his influential position in the Senate Agricultural Committee to improve the Food Stamp Program during the upcoming reauthorization in the Fall 2001.

Although improving the Food Stamp Program in Idaho is a crucial first step in eliminating hunger in the state, Idaho must also provide alternative programs that increase the purchasing power of low-income families and increase access to other food sources. Repealing Idaho's statewide grocery sales tax can give low-income families more purchasing power when they go to the store to purchase food. Creating a low-cost family hunting and fishing package will encourage low-income families to use hunting and fishing as a source of food.

Idaho needs to tackle hunger on multiple levels. Strengthening the Food Stamp Program, repealing the grocery tax, and creating a low-cost Family Survival Package will help insure that no family is hungry in Idaho.

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About the organizations releasing this report

Idaho Community Action Network (ICAN) serves as a powerful, consolidated voice for Idaho's poor, with chapters and membership clusters in six Idaho communities, including the state's three largest cities and numerous rural towns. Through ICAN, low-income Idaho families have a voice in the decisions that impact their lives. In addition to its direct action work, ICAN runs a statewide, volunteer-driven food program that helps low-income families supplement their monthly budgets. ICAN's community organizing model integrates the provision of food with training, leadership development and action on issues.

The Northwest Federation of Community Organizations (NWFCO) is a regional federation of five statewide, community-based social and economic justice organizations located in the states of Idaho, Montana, Oregon and Washington: Idaho Community Action Network (ICAN), Montana People's Action (MPA), Oregon Action (OA), Washington Citizen Action (WCA), and Coalition of Montanans Concerned with Disabilities (CMCD). Collectively, these organizations engage in community organizing and coalition building in 14 rural and major metropolitan areas, including the Northwest's largest cities (Seattle and Portland) and the largest cities in Montana and Idaho.

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