The Montgomery County Food Security Plan, released by the Office of the County Executive in April 2017, outlines extensive strategies for reducing the number of food insecure individuals in the County. The Montgomery County Food Council, the Department of Health and Human Services, and many community nonprofit, business, and agency partners, have been working diligently to implement the Food Security Plan’s recommendations.

YEARS 2-3 RECOMMENDATIONS

- Health in all policies for food assistance
- Increase retail food access and expand food production
- Better connect health care community to food security
- Maximize participation in benefits programs
- Strengthen food assistance infrastructure
- Engage community partners and the private sector
- Develop enhanced communication strategies
- Strategically build capacity of smaller organizations and establish new programs

FOOD INSECURITY IN MONTGOMERY COUNTY

According to Feeding America statistics, the food insecurity rate in Montgomery County equals 6.1% of the County’s population, and 12.9% of children. However, the most recent FARMS data for the County indicate an increase in the number of participants, reflecting the reliance of families upon food assistance programs to alleviate their needs.

Root Causes of Food Insecurity

- Poverty: 6.7% of residents live below the poverty level of $24,600 (for a family of four)
- Living Below the Self-Sufficiency Standard: The self-sufficiency standard for a family of four to afford basic amenities in Montgomery County is $91,252 per year
- Federal Food Assistance Program Ineligibility: Many Montgomery County residents earn too much to qualify for food assistance programs but not enough to reach the self-sufficiency standard
- Lack of Transportation: Residents without reliable transportation may be limited to convenience stores with limited nutritious foods
- Employment Status: 3.2% of Montgomery County residents were unemployed in March 2019
YEAR 2 STRATEGIES

FOOD ASSISTANCE RESOURCE DIRECTORY

In 2018, the Food Council created a comprehensive directory of over 75 food assistance providers in the County, along with information on locations for benefits application assistance and Senior Congregate Meals. The Directory is updated annually and available in English and Spanish, and so far more than 3,000 print copies and multiple electronic copies have been distributed throughout the County.

The Online Food Assistance Resource Directory, released by the Food Council in January 2019, is an interactive, searchable database and map that allows food assistance information to be shared more widely and effectively.

MAXIMIZING PARTICIPATION IN BENEFITS PROGRAMS

According to Maryland Hunger Solutions, 64% of Montgomery County residents who are eligible to receive SNAP benefits are not enrolled—the highest rate for any County in Maryland. Seniors are one of the populations most “at-risk” for food insecurity.

The Senior Hunger and SNAP Outreach Program, created by the Food Council, in collaboration with DHHS, Maryland Hunger Solutions, the Community Action Agency, and Manna Food Center leverages dozens of community volunteers to provide:

- Trusted, consistent support navigating the SNAP application and enrollment process
- Accurate information about other multi-sector resources that exist in the County

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND OUTREACH

Engagement of the community was a critical strategy in creating the Food Security Plan, and is equally important in its implementation. It’s essential that the lived experience of food insecurity directly informs our implementation strategies, so to ensure this, the Food Council recruited a community advisory board in 2018, comprised of County residents who have experienced food insecurity.

This Food Security Plan Community Advisory Board (“FSCAB”) meets quarterly, and in addition to advising on Food Security Plan implementation efforts, they participate in community engagement and advocacy training opportunities.

IN 2018, FOOD COUNCIL STAFF LED OR PARTICIPATED IN:

- More than 110 community meetings
- 30 conferences

STANDARDIZING DATA COLLECTION & REPORTING

The Data Collection Spreadsheet was developed in 2018 to collect the service data of food assistance providers in the County. Data collected through this tool will be added to FoodStat to provide the most accurate picture of unmet need in the County.

FoodStat, an interactive data analysis platform that displays more than 80 different datasets related to food access, was created by CountyStat and launched on May 1st, 2018. New service data will help create a two year baseline to:

- Assess the impact and reach of food distribution and access in the County to improve outreach and service delivery
- Allow stakeholders to make strategic, informed decisions and investments backed by data
STRENGTHENING INFRASTRUCTURE & ENHANCED COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

Since the release of the Food Security Plan in 2017, the Food Council and community partners have created tools and provided educational resources such as training webinars, tutorials, toolkits, site visits and member spotlights at monthly Food Recovery and Access Working Group (FRAWG) meetings to build the capacity of local food assistance providers.

A January 2019 survey indicated that members found FRAWG meetings extremely beneficial and that working on the Food Security Plan strategies had:

- Improved service delivery practices
- Helped to identify new sources of funding and food donations
- Helped members learn about new partnership opportunities

CONNECTIVITY, COLLABORATION & INFORMATION SHARING

The Food Council’s Food Recovery and Access Working Group (FRAWG), which meets monthly, creates a community of practice for organizations engaged in food security initiatives.

This Working Group:

- Builds the capacity of food assistance organizations
- Amplifies the work of Community Food Rescue
- Integrates local and regional efforts in the implementation of the County’s Food Security Plan

IN 2018:

- 11 FRAWG meetings
- 272 people attended FRAWG meetings
- 314 people connected through email listserv
- 32 local food assistance providers
- 31 local partner agencies/multiservice organizations

YEAR 2 STRATEGIES

Ways in Which the FSP Has Been Helpful

Ability to Collaborate with Members and Engage Clients

POLICY & ADVOCACY

The Food Council’s Policy Committee submitted multiple Letters of Support for legislation in 2019 which passed in the Maryland State House and Senate, such as:

- The Summer SNAP for Children Act (SB218), which provides SNAP-eligible families with an extra $30 per child per month during the summer vacation to help purchase food
- The SNAP Restaurant Meals Program (SB752), which allows certain SNAP recipients who are unable to prepare their own food to use their benefits to buy prepared meals in restaurants, and stores/markets approved by DHS
- The Maryland Farms and Families Fund (SB483), which increases the spending power of Marylanders to buy fresh fruits and vegetables at Farmers Markets
HEALTH IN ALL POLICIES FOR FOOD ASSISTANCE

The nutritional content of food has important long term health impacts, especially for residents struggling with chronic diseases such as diabetes and high blood pressure. Our **FRAWG Nutrition Standards Subgroup** is developing educational resources to:

- Increase the capacity of food assistance providers to attract healthier food donations
- Enable their participants to make the most nutritious and healthful food choices

FOOD ECONOMY AND EDUCATION

The Food Council's other Working Groups' initiatives address other recommendations of the Food Security Plan:

- **Our MoCo Made initiative** supports local farms and food and beverage producers to expand local food production and distribution
- **Our Food Literacy Assessment** is an environmental scan of available food education opportunities with recommendations to increase resident access to nutrition and gardening education, culinary skills, and food safety

CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE FOOD ACCESS

Montgomery County is home to people from many different countries of origin which have rich cultural and traditional connections to food. **FRAWG’s Culturally Appropriate Food Access Subgroup** is building on a report compiled by a team of American University students for a capstone project in 2018 by exploring ways to increase the number of culturally appropriate foods available at food assistance providers and retail locations.

CONNECT THE HEALTH CARE COMMUNITY TO FOOD SECURITY

**FRAWG’s Health Care and Food Access Subgroup** brings together partners from the food assistance and health care communities to develop strategies that incorporate food insecurity screenings and subsequent referrals to resources ("Screen & Intervene") into the patient care process.
COMMUNITY FINDINGS 
& RECOMMENDATIONS

IN 2018 DHHS, MCFC AND 
COLLABORATING PARTNERS HELD:

9 focus groups with 54 in 
English Spanish Amharic 
caregivers of children under 5

FINDINGS INCLUDED THE NEED FOR:

- More culturally appropriate food education
- More clarity about food assistance resources and benefits
- Higher benefits amounts to reflect the high cost of living
- More efficient and cost effective transportation options

Residents with Mental Health Disabilities

DHHS and the Food Council have begun conducting listening sessions with mental health professionals and clients at Family Services, Inc. to discuss the barriers and challenges to accessing and preparing healthy food experienced by Montgomery County residents with mental health illnesses.

College Student Food Insecurity

According to recent local and national studies, the level of food insecurity among college students is rapidly increasing, due in part to the rising cost of housing and tuition. The Food Council has worked with Montgomery College and the Universities at Shady Grove to facilitate listening sessions, provide food insecurity resources and discuss initiatives such as campus campaigns, food pantries, and advocacy toolkits to help alleviate food insecurity.

RECOMMENDATIONS YEARS 4-5

- Promote Food Preservation
- Increase Nutrition & Culinary Skills Education
- Establish Workforce & Economic Development Program
- Increase Local Food Production
- Develop Disaster/ Emergency Preparedness Plan
- Expand Food Education Capacity

WAYS TO GET INVOLVED

Visit mocofoodcouncil.org/get-involved for volunteer opportunities, job postings, upcoming events, ways to donate and information about joining the Food Council or participating in a Working Group.

THE FUTURE OF THE FOOD SECURITY PLAN: LOOKING AHEAD

In Year Three, Food Security Plan implementation will focus on strategies to increase benefits application assistance outreach and case management, and work with healthcare providers to help facilitate Screen & Intervene programs, along with appropriate sustainable referral and long-term case management mechanisms.

We are encouraged by the positive effect that the Plan has had on the community since 2017. In all of our efforts at the Food Council, we endeavor to stay true to our mission of centering our activities around the community and its needs, to ensure that community voices are heard and given the weight they deserve.
THANK YOU

We are grateful to the following organizations who have engaged this year with the Food Recovery and Access Working Group:

Adventist Community Services of Greater Washington
Adventist HealthCare
Bethesda HELP
Burness
Capital Area Food Bank
Catholic Charities
CCI Health & Wellness Services
CHEER
Christ Lutheran Church
City of Gaithersburg
Community Action Agency
Coordination Council of Chinese American Associations
Cornerstone Montgomery
CountyStat
Crossroads Community Food Network
Difference Makers
Epworth United Methodist Church
Family Services Inc.
First African Methodist Episcopal Church of Gaithersburg
Gaithersburg HELP
Giant Food
God Glorified Church of God in Christ
Healing and Deliverance Ministry
Holy Cross Health Interfaith Works
Institute for Public Health Innovation
Johns Hopkins University
Justice & Advocacy Council of Montgomery County
KindWorks
Kingdom Fellowship
AME Church
Luther Rice Memorial Church
Manna Food Center Community Food Rescue
Maryland Hunger Solutions
Meals on Wheels of Central Maryland
Meals on Wheels of Takoma Park
Montgomery College
Montgomery County Coalition for the Homeless
Montgomery County Collaboration Council
Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services
Montgomery County Muslim Foundation
Montgomery County Public Schools
Montgomery Housing Partnership
Mt. Jezreel Baptist Church
New Creation Church
No Kid Hungry
Olney HELP
Primary Care Coalition
Rainbow Community Development Center
Rockville HELP
Saint Luke Lutheran Church
September House MAJ
SHARE Food Network
Silver Spring Christian Reformed Church
Sodexo
St. Jane De Chantal Church
St. Luke Church
Suburban Hospital
University of Maryland Extension
WorkSource Montgomery
WUMCO HELP
Yad Yehuda

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For more information, visit mocofoodcouncil.org, or contact us at info@mocofoodcouncil.org