

# Report highlights food shortfalls in county

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If you asked Kathy Hartman a year ago where to find the Thurmont Food Bank, she would have had no idea, nor would she have pictured herself relying on the service for food.

But on Friday afternoon, Hartman was among the dozens of people seated among the rows of folding chairs inside the town's public works building, which also serves as its food bank. She clutched a stack of reusable grocery bags, waiting for her name to be called, signaling her turn to fill the bags with the stacks of canned goods and loaves of bread and pastries set out on the tables.

It's a far cry from her former life, working as a nurse and spending time with her husband in their Smithsburg home. But after a series of health problems in early 2016 — and missed days from work — she lost her job, she said. And, after her husband died in a car crash in February, she moved to Thurmont to live with her son and his family.

At the same time, she started showing up at the Thurmont Food Bank for

bi-monthly food supplies to fill in the gap for the groceries she could no longer afford.

About 7 percent of Frederick County residents, or 16,990 people, faced food insecurity in 2015, according to a new report by Feeding America, a national hunger-relief advocacy and service organization. And while fewer Frederick County residents go hungry than their state and nationwide counterparts, it's harder for Frederick County's food insecure to recover, according to the latest data.

The Map the Meal Gap report published this month highlights the plight of the "food insecure" nationwide and in individual states and counties based on federal agencies' survey data from 2015. The report defines anyone who went without "consistent access to adequate food" at any point during the year as food insecure.

Statewide, food insecurity affected 11.4 percent of Marylanders. And across America, 13.4 percent of people faced food shortages, the report stated.

The nationwide data shows an improvement over previous years. The percent of

(See **SHORTFALLS A5**)



Staff photo by Dan Gross

**Kathy Hartman, of Thurmont, picks out fresh vegetables on Friday at the Thurmont Food Bank.**

**Shortfalls**

(Continued from A1)

Americans who faced food insecurity in 2015 represents a "significant decrease" from the 15.4 percent of food insecure people in 2014. It also continues the multi-year decline of food insecurity since 2009, when food insecurity spiked to 16.6 percent of the population.

Though fewer people nationwide face food insecurity, the food budget shortfall has grown. The per-person food budget shortfall rose 3 percent since 2014, and 13 percent since 2008, the report stated.

In Frederick County, a food insecure person in 2015 faced an annual \$560.27 gap between earnings and cost of food, the report stated. This is \$33.08 more than the national per-person gap of \$527.19 per year.

**Behind the data**

Carmen Del Guercio, president of the Maryland Food Bank, called the report's findings "encouraging," although not necessarily surprising.

"We kind of expected there would be some improvement," he said, referring to the drop in food insecurity nationwide.

Continued economic growth since the 2008 recession explained, at least in part, the drop in food insecurity rates.

"The best program for hunger and food insecurity is a good paying job," Del Guercio said.

Sarah McAleavy, the Frederick Community Action Agency's food and nutrition supervisor, also named economic vitality as a source of the decrease in customers at the Frederick Food Bank. The food bank saw a peak in demand after the recession, serving about 1,000 families per month, she said.

As the economy improved, the number of families served through the South Market Street food bank decreased, initially to 850 families per month, and more recently, to 650, she said.

The Frederick Community Action Agency's food bank is one of a dozen food banks scattered across Frederick County, although there are also additional options provided through smaller-scale food pantries. The Maryland Food Bank, which is based in Baltimore and has a second location in Hagerstown, also serves Frederick County residents.

Frederick's favorable ranking is also a testament to the support offered by its large number of government, school and social service agencies to help fill the gap for those in need. Frederick County's service network is the strongest in western Maryland, according to Del Guercio.

Malcolm Furgol, United Way of Frederick County's community impact director, also highlighted the county's array of community services, evidenced in a separate report published earlier this year by the United Way in Maryland. The report graded each county's economic viability in terms of housing affordability, job opportunities and community resources. Frederick County received a top grade in the community resources category.

"Frederick County is very good at addressing basic needs," Furgol said. "We're good at feeding people when they're hungry."

But others said the report fails to capture the extent of Frederick's food insecurity problem. Among them was the Rev. Sally Joyner Giffin, who serves as pastor of Hagerston Chapel Episcopal Episcopal Parish in Thurmont and helps coordinate the Thurmont Food Bank as part of a consortium of local churches.

"You might look at the total county and think we're doing pretty well, but there are real pockets of poverty, of people who are falling further and further behind," she said.

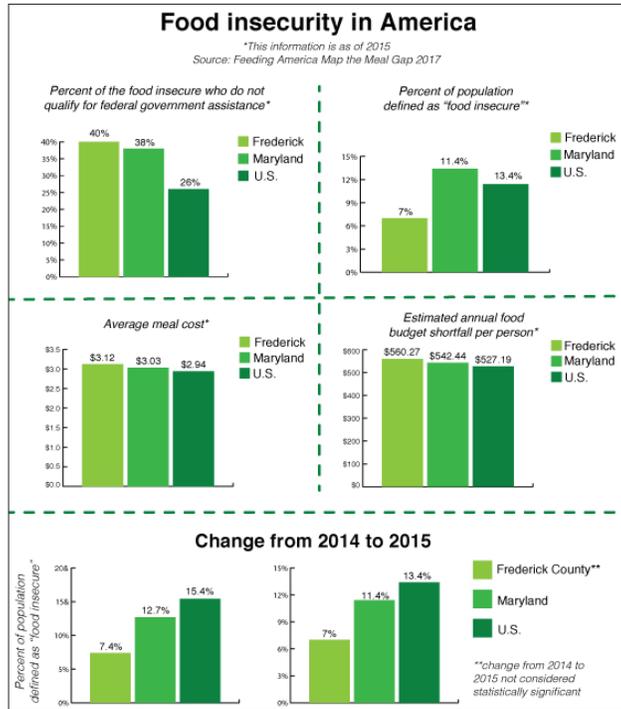
The Thurmont Food Bank saw the highest number of clients in 2015: 14,430 people served, according to Joyner Giffin. In 2014, the food bank served 12,392 people.

Mike Dickson, CEO and founder of Seed of Life



Staff photo by Dan Gross

Volunteers Bernie Ricketts, left, and Harold Bollinger pack bags with food on Friday at the Thurmont Food Bank.



Nurseries, also thought the Frederick-specific data in the report was misleading. Seed of Life, a community-supported agriculture program, has experienced significant increases in demand for fresh produce delivered through monthly food drops at sites around the county.

The 12,000 to 15,000 pounds of food his group distributes — three times per month at each of three drop sites — has become insufficient, forcing him to sometimes turn people away or ration the food, he said. He plans to add a fourth site and increase the number of times per month they distribute food in response to the growing need.

The percentage of elementary school students in the county who qualify for free or reduced-price school meals has also gone up, according to Hermine Bernstein. Bernstein sponsors a local chapter of the national organization Blessings in a Backpack, which provides weekend meals to food insecure children.

A majority of the Frederick County Public Schools children who receive food through Blessings also get free or discounted meals at school, based on income requirements set by the USDA's Free and Reduced-price Meals (FARM) program. Blessings does not require recipients to qualify for federal nutrition programs to receive its weekend meals.

When Bernstein started the local chapter in 2014, 25

percent of Frederick County students qualified for the federal school lunch program. In the 2016-2017 academic year, 27 percent of students met the income threshold, she said.

The program currently serves 1,700 children every weekend, with 300 others on the waiting list, she said. There are also three more elementary schools that have asked to be added to the program.

"The need is great, and I don't see it diminishing," she said.

**A blessing and a curse**

Del Guercio framed Maryland's relative economic prosperity as a "blessing." But he also described it as a "curse" — accompanied by a higher cost of living, which, in turn, exacerbates the plight of the hungry.

"If you're left behind, it's harder to recover," he said.

The report named underemployment, stagnant wages and rising costs of "essentials" — particularly rent and housing costs — as primary sources for this widening gap between income and the cost of food.

In the county, the lack of affordable housing tops the list of these rising essential costs, according to numerous sources.

A report published in December by consultant HR&A Advisors estimated a 5,720-unit gap in affordable housing as of 2014. The report also highlighted that income levels have not kept pace with rising rents, forcing

residents to spend more of their income on housing. Mary Coffey said rent and related expenses ate up 80 percent of the \$1,040 monthly disability check that serves as her only source of income. Coffey, 62, rents a house in northern Frederick County.

Without the Thurmont Food Bank, she would have no food, she said.

Even now, there are times when her meal consists of a can of soup, or a peanut butter sandwich.

"You eat what you got," she said. "You learn to do without."

Bernstein named cost of housing as one reason why some Blessings recipients change schools. A number of Blessings recipients who formerly attended Monocacy Elementary School in north Frederick have moved to Waverly Elementary School as a result of their families moving. Bernstein suspected this was the result of cheaper housing options surrounding Waverly than those near Monocacy.

Health care and transportation costs also leave less money for food, especially for residents in the outer reaches of the county where services are spread out and public transportation is scarce. The Thurmont Food Bank has started delivering meals to some immobile recipients for that reason, Joyner Giffin said.

"Eighteen miles might not sound that far, until you've got an 80-year-old with an oxygen tank who can't drive," she said.

Hartman, who doesn't have a car or any money to pay for gas, relies on her son to drive her to the food bank in Thurmont. Without him, she would have no way to get there, she said.

As other costs rise, so does the cost of food. The average meal cost in Frederick County was \$3.12 in 2015, compared with a national average of \$2.94.

It's a correlation that makes sense from a market perspective, Furgol said.

"When you can get top dollar for housing because you're marketing your product to a certain audience, why not do the same with food?" he said.

**Redefining 'the hungry'**

Federal nutrition programs for low-income people can help fill the food gap, but not everyone who is food insecure meets the income eligibility requirements for such assistance. And in places with a higher cost of living, like Frederick County, a greater percentage of residents don't qualify for these programs but still can't afford enough food.

Among Frederick County's food insecure residents, 42 percent earned about 200 percent of the federal poverty level — the threshold used for most federal nutrition programs, the report stated. That's \$48,500 a year for a family of four, or \$23,540 for an individual, according to the 2015 federal poverty level guidelines.

Nationwide, 26 percent of those defined as food in-

secure were ineligible for government assistance programs. This reflects those who earned more than 185 percent of the federal poverty level, an average determined from the income requirements that vary across states.

Neither the Maryland Food Bank nor the county's food bank programs require recipients to meet certain income thresholds, although they track how many participants qualify for those programs.

Del Guercio highlighted this as one of the biggest misperceptions about the state food bank program. About 38 percent of program recipients earn too much money to qualify for federal nutrition programs, he said.

Dickson wasn't sure how many of the families who pick up food from Seeds of Life were also part of federal nutrition programs, but he thought the number was decreasing. He has heard from many recipients who used to get government assistance, but no longer qualify due to the changing, increasingly stringent regulations, he said.

McAleavy also noted that the guidelines for such programs seem to be tightening.

"They just keep making it harder and harder," she said. Ronald Wolfe, Coffey's brother, who also receives food from the Thurmont Food Bank, used to receive food stamps. He stopped participating in the government program because his monthly allocation was so small — about \$8 per month, he said.

And with shrinking federal assistance, the types of people who are food insecure have changed. The Frederick Food Bank has seen a growing number of seniors, as well as what McAleavy termed "working families" — those who have jobs, but make less than they need to afford food.

Joyner Giffin reported similar demographics at the Thurmont Food Bank. "Once you factor in child care, that's one more cost that makes it harder to pay for food," she said, referring to the increase in young families who receive food through the food bank.

**Filling the gap**

Expanding federal nutrition programs was one of several recommendations in the report geared toward helping fill the persisting food gap. Del Guercio, too, said it was important to at least maintain benefit amounts and eligibility requirements of such programs.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, often referred to as food stamps, is one such program. Republican lawmakers in Congress have eyed funding cuts.

"We feel very strongly we don't want any [cuts] to that," Del Guercio said. "As these things change, it puts a strain on the safety net."

The report also highlighted the value of food banks as "critical sources of food assistance," and called for reducing barriers to donations that give food to families in need.

One of those barriers, at least for some, is pride. Dickson has observed a growing number of working families who don't consider themselves poor in the classical definition, and are therefore reluctant to sign up for benefits.

"A lot of folks might not be in that data [in the report] being up, but they're embarrassed," Dickson said. "It's a pride issue."

McAleavy agreed. "I hear it every day," she said. "People just don't think of themselves as poor in that way."

It was hard for Hartman to admit she needed help, she said. "I never had to ask for help with anything before," she said. "I was always the one helping others."

After more than six months of going to the food bank, she is starting to come to terms with her situation. At the same time, she has continued to look for a new job.

Despite the lack of success her job search efforts have yielded thus far, she isn't giving up.

"That's not an option," she said.