

Community Council Report



Improving
Food Security

A report to the citizens of the region between Burbank and Dayton,
from the Snake River to Milton-Freewater

Summer
2014

Improving Food Security

Community Council Study Committee

The 2014 Study Committee members met for 24 weeks, from Jan. 16 to June 26, 2014. The study management team developed the study curriculum and met through the course of the study to guide the process.



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Community Council

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Executive summary

Improving food security is a multifaceted issue. While the complexities involved in meeting the challenge seem daunting, the sheer number of approaches one can take to attend to aspects of food insecurity makes the issue rewarding to address.

Some of the approaches confront short-term issues, such as providing people with food or clarifying information about food pantry hours or policies. Other approaches

acknowledge the need for longer-term solutions, such as supporting attainment of higher education, teaching food education courses, and creating opportunities for people to develop stronger social networks.

Both short- and long-term strategies are necessary in confronting the issues associated with food insecurity, as the study made clear. The Community Council Study Committee framed its study with

this question, “How can we ensure that all residents of the region have access to adequate amounts of nutritious foods and the means to utilize them?”

Over the course of 16 weeks, the study committee met to learn about issues relevant to this topic. The committee then spent an additional nine weeks using a consensus-based approach to review and agree on the findings and to develop conclusions and recommendations.



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Major problems

PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION issues present food access difficulties. Limited bus schedules and lack of routes that go directly by food pantries limit access.

ISOLATION: Isolated individuals are more likely to be food insecure. Both formal and informal support networks are important in addressing issues of isolation.

FOOD DESERTS: There are many food deserts in the Community Council's region, especially in the more rural areas, where there are limited choices, higher prices and fewer nutritious options.

LACK OF KNOWLEDGE about how to budget and shop for, prepare, preserve, and store food is an obstacle to achieving food security. Food education classes in schools and the community that teach skills such as budgeting, shopping, cooking, preserving and gardening convey essential information.

RESTRICTIONS: Clients have noted difficulties in being required to access three different food pantries, once per month, each with different times, days and practices. Limited hours of operation also present a challenge for some clients.

Recommended solutions

Provide ways for food-pantry clients to conveniently access food pantries and transport food home. This includes aligning bus route stops and pantry locations.

Establish, promote and fund programs that help strengthen community and neighborhood networks, including cooking and food education classes, meal sharing, community gardening, and gatherings.

Improve rural and remote areas' ability to access nutritious food by supporting healthy retail points, expanded options, mobile retail food trucks and mobile food pantries.

Expand food education classes for pantry clients, including life-skill classes and information to improve the strategies clients use to plan for, procure, use and store food.

Assess and coordinate policies, hours, locations and food resource information that best meet client needs.



A summary of what was heard

These findings represent information received by the study committee and the study committee's consensus as to the reasonable validity of the information received. They are derived from published materials, from facts reported by resource people and from a consensus of the committee's understanding of the opinions of the resource people.

INTRODUCTION

According to the International Fund for Agricultural Development, food security "is a constituent part of the broader concept of nutrition security. A household can be said to be nutritionally secure if it is able to ensure a healthy life for all of its members at all times. Nutritional security thus requires that household members have access not only to food, but also to other requirements for a healthy life, such as health care, a hygienic environment and knowledge of personal hygiene. Food security is a necessary but insufficient condition for ensuring nutrition security."

The World Health Organization (WHO) established a similar set of criteria, stating that food security exists "when all people at all times have access to sufficient, safe, nutritious food to maintain a healthy and active life." Commonly, the concept of food security is defined as including both physical and economic access to food that meets people's dietary needs as well as their food preferences.... Food security is a complex sustainable development issue, linked to health through malnutrition, but also to sustainable economic development, environment, and trade."

These definitions of food security

acknowledge the complexities involved in trying to solve the problem of hunger. They recognize that addressing issues of food insecurity go beyond merely providing food for people. Achieving food security also works to provide structures that support people's independence and self-sufficiency.

The Improving Food Security Study Committee has used the WHO's three-pillar approach to frame the assessment of challenges and opportunities within the Community Council's region.

These pillars were useful for assessing the degree to which the factors necessary to achieve food security are in place. The study

committee went beyond the three pillars to acknowledge the significance of strong social connections, healthy communities and recognition of food security as an issue of broader social justice. Focusing on social justice and strong communities addresses food security issues at a deep level and provides a strong foundation for the three pillars.

BACKGROUND

The far-reaching nature of the issues related to achieving food security can make addressing the issues daunting.

Aaron Bobrow-Strain noted that historically the most effective ways to address the issues are by taking small, manageable steps and understanding food security as a social justice issue. Working toward social justice focuses on developing people's capacities for autonomy and recognizes that providing food alone does not solve the issues that contribute to food insecurity.

The World Health Organization uses a three-pillar approach to assess food security. This approach shaped the Improving Food Security Study Committee's own understanding of the pieces that need to be in place to achieve a functional system on a more practical level:

- 1. FOOD AVAILABILITY:** sufficient quantities of food available on a consistent basis.
- 2. FOOD ACCESS:** sufficient resources to obtain appropriate foods for a nutritious diet.
- 3. FOOD USE:** appropriate use based on knowledge of basic nutrition and care, as well as adequate water and sanitation.

Social justice perspective

As Bobrow-Strain stated, “Most people recognize that food insecurity is a symptom of larger social problems.” Lawson Knight stated that the solution is not just about helping people exit poverty but about helping people become their most productive selves. He further explained that the most effective approach is to address the root causes of food insecurity and then maximize the positive effects of those solutions.

Knight noted that having a college education is an equalizer and a predictor of food security. Among those most at risk for becoming chronically food-insecure are those whose highest level of education is high school completion or lower. Having a college degree positively correlates to both higher income and food security.

Other approaches with a social justice focus include the following:

- ▶ Promote projects that result in improved food access as a doorway to tackling root causes. One example of an organization that does this is Hilltop Urban Garden (HUG) in Tacoma, Washington.
- ▶ Help people obtain employment as a leading way to achieve food security.
- ▶ Focus less on people’s food choices and more on social structures, including support networks, employment and education.
- ▶ Provide higher wages for food chain workers—from plow to plate—including farmers, food processors and distributors, food

service and grocery workers, etc. In Walla Walla, 31 percent of total workers are food chain workers (twice the national average). Food chain workers are 1.5 times more likely to be highly food-insecure.

Strong communities and networks

Strong communities and networks are essential components in achieving food security. Speakers noted that well-connected communities benefit everyone in those communities. Strong social ties are necessary for addressing food insecurity and can be instrumental at every level of the food chain system.

According to Oregon Food Bank (OFB), nationally recognized for its innovative approaches to addressing food insecurity, the conversation around food must include all citizens—from food producers to food pantry staff and consumers. People who eat food need to talk with those who produce it in order to arrive at solutions, as well as to achieve community buy-in for solutions.

Support networks (both formal and informal) are important in helping people stay motivated and connected to others. This is overtly recognized by organizations such as:

- ▶ The local Salvation Army chapter, whose goal is to be a catalyst for community engagement.
- ▶ College Place’s SonBridge Center, which provides classes to build skills and support people’s ability to develop or sustain productive relationships.

By the numbers

Washington state’s average free and reduced-price meal usage in public schools is 46.1 percent. The free and reduced-price meal statistics are an indicator of poverty among families with school-age children. There has not been a statistically significant study of the population in need in the Community Council’s region. However, in every city included in the region, with the exception of Waitsburg, a disproportionately high percentage of youth and children are eligible to receive free and reduced-price meals:

WAITSBURG	41.9%
BURBANK	51.2%
WALLA WALLA	52.8%
DAYTON	55.8%
TOUCHET	57.6%
MILTON-FREEWATER	72%
PRESCOTT	72.7%

Findings

SonBridge staff noted that food-insecure clients who are able to maintain positive attitudes and make healthy choices about food seem better able to navigate their complex situations. Issues with food insecurity are compounded when accompanied by isolation, depression and low income. SonBridge and The Salvation Army find the issues of motivation and connection significant enough that they offer classes to provide encouragement and a sense of community.

Washington state ranks 15th in hunger in the nation and is among the top six states where hunger is growing the fastest.

Strong social networks are also significant in other ways. For senior citizens, informal support networks make it more possible for seniors to remain healthy and in their own homes, resulting in significant cost savings over assisted care. Many seniors who cannot get to the food pantries rely on their informal support networks to help them get their food.

Another relationship that has been demonstrated to be effective is that between pregnant women and their OB-GYNs, who are good about recommending the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) to women who may benefit by being enrolled.

Community connections are also supported through venues that encourage group activities, such as meal sharing, cooking with others and gardening. Already existent local meal sharing venues include Commitment to Community (C2C)

potlucks, breakfasts and dinners at the Christian Aid Center, church lunches, meals following cooking classes at The Salvation Army, and lunches at the Senior Center.

An organization from outside the region, Growing Veterans of Lynden, Washington, builds community by putting veterans in charge of community gardens and outreach programs, roles which help ease veterans' transitions back into civilian life. These leadership roles leverage the military training and leadership skills of veterans while also establishing community gardens and outreach.

Demographic information

Northwest Harvest, Washington's statewide hunger relief agency, notes that Washington state ranks 15th in hunger in the nation and is among the top six states where hunger is growing the fastest:

"Hunger is a result of poverty. The unemployment rate in Washington state in 2011 was 9.2 percent, but that figure doesn't reflect the number of people who are underemployed, the number of those who have given up looking for work or the overall loss of available jobs in the economy."

Walla Walla Public Schools (WWPS) reports an increase in free and reduced-price meal-eligible students each year. At St. Paul's Episcopal Church's Loaves and Fishes program, the number of people who come in to the soup kitchen has doubled within the past two years to approximately 127 people per meal, with the fastest-growing demographic being teens and young adults.

Local food banks and pantries also see this trend, observing that the number of people who need help meeting nutritional needs is growing. Illustrative of this is the following:

- ▶ Blue Mountain Action Council (BMAC) served 10 percent more households in 2013 than in 2012.
- ▶ The Christian Aid Center of Walla Walla observed that over 50 percent of those who depend on its daily meals are entire families (as opposed to single individuals in the past).
- ▶ Bread Basket of Milton-Freewater reported that one to three new families register each month to receive help from Bread Basket, without an equivalent number of families leaving the program.
- ▶ Of the people served by Walla Walla's Pantry Shelf, 20 to 25 percent are senior citizens.

Overall, the need for food increases every year, as does the number of people who are served. The food pantries in general see many of the same clients over years, indicating that the majority of their clients are chronically food-insecure.

According to OFB, the issues that cause people to be chronically food-insecure cannot be solved solely by distributing food. Rather, OFB advocates approaches like its Voices project, a grassroots assessment of food issues in which clients are asked what they need to change in their lives so that they can become food-secure. The OFB staff provides consulting in other states about how to implement this approach.

For those consumers who have moved into a state of food security, securing living-wage employment has been the key factor. Also mentioned as a significant factor is being able to sustain the motivation and persistence in finding solutions to food insecurity.

The strategies of helping people find jobs and supporting their mental health and social connections acknowledge the significance of providing a “hand up” versus a “handout” in helping people move from food insecurity to food security. Whereas a handout directly addresses immediate effects of food insecurity (hunger), providing a hand up goes deeper to address root causes, including helping people become more securely independent and self-sufficient. The three pillars established by the WHO seek to ensure that the resources and skills necessary to fully engage hand-up strategies are in place.

Applying WHO's 3 pillars to study on improving food security



Physical availability of food involves a variety of factors, including those related to production, supply and distribution.

The Community Council's study region is largely agricultural and produces an abundance of food; however, little of the food produced within the region is sold directly to local-area stores. For example, locally produced apples are first sold to metropolitan retail sale and distribution centers. These centers, located outside the region, may or may not supply this area.

The local apples that do make their way back into local-area stores have first been shipped out to distribution centers before being shipped back in, driving up cost while reducing profit to local economies. The only store in Walla Walla County that buys directly from a local apple producer, Broetje Orchards, is Andy's Market in College Place.

The city of Walla Walla has a number of supermarkets located in different neighborhoods. However, communities without supermarkets, such as Starbuck, Prescott and Touchet, have low food availability. These places are referred to as “food deserts,” defined by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention



Findings

(CDC) as “areas that lack access to affordable fruits, vegetables, whole grains, low-fat milk, and other foods that make up a full and healthy diet.” In addition, rural-area food prices are generally higher than those in more densely populated areas. The combination of limited retail points and higher prices has a negative influence on food security.

Some local efforts that seek to address availability issues take a more direct approach. For example:

- ▶ Columbia Fresh Produce purchases produce considered waste (edible but unsalable, usually due to cosmetic blemishes) from local farmers and sells it to food banks.
- ▶ Lincoln High School supplies homeless students in need with emergency items such as food, blankets and clothing and so is an informal distribution point. (Note: OFB believes some backpack programs wrongly place responsibility for food procurement on children, a responsibility that rightly belongs to the parents or guardians.)
- ▶ The Assumption Community Garden donated more than 1,200 pounds of produce to St. Vincent de Paul’s food pantry in 2013.

For those able to plant, grow and

harvest food on their own property, the backyard garden is a highly accessible option for getting nutritious, fresh produce. For those who do not have a garden space, OFB provides mobile gardens in shopping carts, which makes produce available while encouraging self-sufficiency.

Growing and harvesting food has a positive effect on helping people adopt more nutritious eating habits.

For others, community gardens provide space for people to grow food. They are a viable option mainly for those who possess the requisite skills, time and access to successfully cultivate their own plots. In addition, community gardens mitigate a root cause of food insecurity by building community, providing experiences of self-sufficiency and increasing accessibility. Some of the positive aspects of community gardening:

- ▶ Growing and harvesting food has a positive effect on helping people adopt more nutritious eating habits.
- ▶ 50 percent of people who garden meet the daily recommendations for fruit and vegetables, as opposed to 25 percent of nongardeners.

- ▶ Actively gardening increases people’s fruit and vegetable consumption.
- ▶ Community gardening creates social occasions. People enjoy talking with others while gardening. Growing Veterans attributes part of its success to the social dimension created by gardening with others.
- ▶ Growing and sharing food has a positive effect on people’s feelings of self-worth and mental health.
- ▶ Community garden partner organizations help leverage a variety of resources and skills and bring together diverse groups and organizations. For example, Growing Veterans teaches participating veterans skills in gardening and packing produce, and it partners with Growing Washington to sell its produce to community-supported agriculture (CSA) and farmers markets. Growing Veterans also partners with outpost programs, which provide locally responsive solutions that support Growing Veterans’ mission.
- ▶ Food pantry clients want more fresh produce, and community members are interested in seeing vacant or unused lots become garden sites. Combining these

Regional food hubs can positively influence availability

“Skyrocketing consumer demand for local and regional food is an economic opportunity for America’s farmers and ranchers. Food hubs facilitate access to these markets by offering critical aggregation, marketing, distribution and other services to farmers and ranchers. By serving as a link between the farm or ranch and regional buyers, food hubs keep more of the retail food dollar circulating in the local economy. In effect, the success of regional food hubs comes from entrepreneurship, sound business sense and a desire for social impact.”

— Tom Vilsack, secretary, U.S. Department of Agriculture

interests could help connect communities, utilize unused lots and increase local access to fresh produce. Water costs, availability and soil quality are issues to consider.

Food pantries cite donations from local gardens (both individual and community gardens) as helping to meet a much-needed demand for fresh produce. While one community garden in Walla Walla provides garden-plot access to people who cultivate food for their own use, other community gardens function to support food pantries:

- ▶ The Community Garden at Assumption was established specifically to grow food to be donated to St. Vincent de Paul.
- ▶ The Walla Walla University Church Community Garden gives fresh produce to the Christian Aid Center.



Another local approach to increasing food availability is gleaning, or the practice of gathering what remains after harvest. Because unharvested food represents waste from a consumer standpoint, gleaning appears to be an attractive option for addressing food security. However, producers note that from their point of view, gleaning represents liabilities that make the practice unattractive. Some area producers do allow gleaning, though the regulations and laws around safe picking and handling practices, as well as the potential for crop damage, make the practice a high liability.

Meanwhile, individual, noncommercial property owners with fruit trees or gardens have expressed interest in granting gleaning access if the food would otherwise go to waste. Working with the agriculture and insurance industries might increase the possibility of having gleaners harvest food for food pantries or other usage.

Finally, preserving gleaned fruits and vegetables and teaching others these skills reduces waste and builds community while promoting self-sufficiency skills. Nationally, food waste is a major issue: 31 percent of food in America is thrown away as waste.

Another major player helping to address the needs of those who are food-insecure is the food pantry system. Regional food pantries are supplied by BMAC in Washington and OFB in Oregon, as well as by charitable donations of individuals and businesses. BMAC gets its food from food drives, the USDA, grocery rescue programs, Second Harvest and other sources. The food that BMAC distributes to food pantries is not intended to provide 100 percent

of food needs for food-insecure households but to supplement other programs.

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits are available only to eligible poverty-level individuals and households. (Note: Those who qualify for SNAP automatically also qualify for WIC, which is less restrictive and serves people at up to 185 percent of the poverty level.)

Food pantries and their clients have voiced a desire to have available more whole and fresh foods, including milk, meat, potatoes, fruits and vegetables. OFB pointed out that providing healthier food, such as fruits and vegetables, for clients is preferable but will not solve the underlying problems of food insecurity.

The foods consistently available in food pantries are nonperishables, including dried staples, such as beans, grains and rice, as well as processed and canned food. Some clients may not be able to use these foods due to health issues, such as diabetes and hypertension, or because they lack the equipment or knowledge of how to prepare the foods.

In addition, some much-needed items are not available, such as food for service animals and baby formula and food (though infant formula and baby food are provided by WIC), unless these items are provided by donations from individuals.

A concern expressed by food pantry staff is whether area pantries will be able to meet future distribution demands. The work at food pantries is largely performed by volunteers, a population that is aging and not being replaced by younger volunteers. OFB recommends recruiting high school students as volunteers in their system.

Pillar 2 FOOD ACCESS

Whereas hunger can be addressed by providing food, food security is a larger issue and is optimally addressed by improving the conditions that create hunger.

Regional SNAPshot

PERCENT OF POPULATION RECEIVING SNAP BENEFITS

In Walla Walla County (population: 59,404), about 14 percent of the population, or 3,117 of 21,497 households, receives SNAP benefits, on par with national rates.

CHILDREN WHO RECEIVE SNAP BENEFITS

Of the 14 percent of the county's population receiving SNAP benefits, 27 percent are children. (Nationally, 25 percent of children live in households that receive SNAP benefits. The group for which food insecurity is most prevalent is single women with children, at 35 percent.)

SNAP BENEFITS THAT GO TO VULNERABLE HOUSEHOLDS

Eighty-seven percent of SNAP benefits go to households with children, seniors or people with disabilities. These groups are the most vulnerable to food insecurity.

Issues of access related to food security refer primarily to people's economic and physical ability to access and procure food. Increasing the food supply alone will not solve the problem. Whereas hunger can be addressed by providing food, food security is a larger issue and is optimally addressed by improving the conditions that create hunger.

Several factors affect a population's ability to access food, including income; transportation; access points; mental health; and lower-than-eligible food assistance enrollment numbers due to social stigma, lack of awareness of services provided or other factors.

BARRIERS TO ACCESS

INCOME

Food security and income share a positive correlation. A major challenge for households in achieving food security is attaining a living-wage job. Even people with relatively high incomes can face food insecurity, and people with low or no incomes face food security challenges at a much higher rate.

As Knight pointed out, Walla Walla on average has 2.5 residents per household, and wage distribution statistics reveal that over half of all area jobs pay less than \$30,000 per year.

National trends reveal the varieties of complexity and range of issues that pose challenges to attaining food security. For example:

- ▶ Newly created jobs pay lower wages than previously existing jobs.
- ▶ People age 50 and older face challenges related to employment barriers.

- ▶ Food costs are outpacing income.
- ▶ The cost of higher education has outpaced income, and a higher-education degree strongly influences the likelihood of achieving food security.
- ▶ Changes to trucking industry regulations will drive food costs up in the next five years.

Regional trends reveal vulnerabilities specific to this area:

- ▶ From 2011–2012 in Walla Walla County, jobs that pay above the average shrank by 2.9 percent.
- ▶ Of the jobs created in Walla Walla from 2011 to 2012, there was an increase of 2.7 percent of jobs that pay below Walla Walla's average rate, and a decrease of 9.6 percent of those that pay twice the average. (Note: The U.S. Census Bureau reveals that median household income in Walla Walla County from 2008 to 2012 was \$47,166; per capita income in the same time period was [in 2012 dollars] \$23,698.)
- ▶ Rural areas have a higher and rapidly increasing rate of students eligible for free and reduced-price meals.
- ▶ A shortage of agricultural workers nationally causes food prices to escalate.



TRANSPORTATION

People who rely on food pantries to meet their nutritional needs, but lack their own transportation, experience difficulties accessing the food pantries and getting food home. First, the public transportation routes in Walla Walla do not go directly by the food pantries. Second, people struggle to transport food because it is heavy and difficult to carry. Food pantries do not provide a way to transport food, though Helpline expressed interest in providing clients with personal shopping carts.

Without independent transportation, many clients rely on public transportation. Clients report that long waits for buses can negatively impact their employment and educational opportunities. In addition, clients found that the time it takes to reach a food pantry by public transportation, added to the time they wait at the pantry to be served, is highly inconvenient and conflicts with work and school schedules.

However, according to the Pantry Shelf, which tried extending hours until 6 p.m. one day of the week for one year, access was not increased by offering what it perceived as after-work hours. Bread Basket also expressed concern about consumer access capabilities, given both the limited days they are open and the large region they serve.

Clients noted that stores in the Tri-Cities (Costco and WinCo) offer food at more affordable prices than in Walla Walla but are too difficult to reach without transportation.

Helpline and Bread Basket provide a limited number of free bus passes for people in need.

ACCESS POINTS

Retail locations

Walla Walla has a number of retail grocery stores and supermarkets open 13 to 20 hours a day, as well as a seasonal farmers market. Outlying areas lack strong retail options, and food within those communities is relatively higher priced. A major challenge of rural areas is that stores are becoming more like convenience stores, and farm workers who live in the rural areas are not able to get food from these stores to support a balanced diet.

In addition, built-environment issues, such as the lack of crosswalks on busy streets, can literally present safety hazards and convenience obstacles that make it difficult to access food.

The use of food trucks or mobile food carts may provide a way to bring fresh produce or food from food pantries into more remote areas or areas with limited access. They would ideally accept payments from SNAP and WIC. Some Oregon farmers markets raise funds locally to provide SNAP incentives, including a SNAP match up to \$10.

Other innovative ideas that could help address access issues include offering a variety of retail models. For example, one presenter cited a model in which grocery store customers are charged according to an income-based sliding scale. Another idea involved introducing retail points that would sell produce deemed unmarketable due to cosmetic blemishes for greatly reduced prices. CSA models can also be flexible agents in meeting community needs, allowing multiple access points and using a varied fee scale that depends on the amount of choice a consumer prefers.

Food pantry locations and hours of service

For those reliant on food pantries and other providers to meet nutritional needs, there are a variety of options. The Christian Aid Center of Walla Walla serves daily breakfast and dinner, area churches serve a soup lunch each weekday, and access to multiple food pantries each month is viewed as more generous than other areas. In Oregon, Bread Basket provides clients with three days of food every two weeks.

In Walla Walla, Helpline screens clients to determine eligibility for food pantry cards with an in-person assessment, a service that food pantries find valuable. Client eligibility is determined by a formula that calculates household income and number of people per household. Helpline renews client food cards monthly and requires that clients make an in-person visit for the renewals. Given the issues with transportation, Helpline is evaluating whether there might be a better way to renew cards and provide services.

For the food pantries associated with OFB, there is no means test, and clients self-declare their need. At OFB-affiliated pantries, when people go to a pantry not in their service area, they are not turned away on their first visit, but are served and directed to the appropriate location for future visits.

OFB requires that regional food banks coordinate with local food pantries to align their operations so that service is predictable and consistent. In Walla Walla, there is little uniformity when it comes to consistent days or times of operation, and no evening-hour access.

Findings

For example:

- ▶ Pantry Shelf: Mondays, 3 to 5 p.m., and Wednesdays and Fridays, 1 to 3 p.m. (Note: Pantry Shelf tried being open during what it perceived as an evening hour—until 6 p.m.—one night of the week for a year but said this one-hour extension did not increase client use.)
- ▶ The Salvation Army: Tuesdays and Thursdays, 9:30 to 11:30 a.m. and 1:30 to 3:30 p.m.

- ▶ St. Vincent de Paul: Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, 9:30 to 11:30 a.m.

Some clients have stated that food pantries' inconsistent hours of operation make it difficult to plan around or organize food acquisition. The difficulty is further compounded because they can access each pantry only once each month within a certain time frame. Going to three separate pantry locations, each with different times, can be difficult to coordinate.

OFB has addressed this challenge

by assigning clients to a specific food pantry location based on the location of their residence. The Salvation Army, however, speculated that having multiple food pantry locations may benefit those clients who may not be able to reach the other places due to transportation issues. Consolidating services and aligning hours for consistency might help address these issues.

Finally, some clients find the lack of evening or weekend hours to access food pantries inconvenient. OFB noted that it does not accept new food pantry affiliates unless those



pantries can provide evening hours of operation.

Helpline noted the convenience introduced by their new location at Kelly Place, which centralizes more social services that are needed in a single place.

The food pantries also supply different kinds of information in different formats—and from different access points—about their services. Some food pantries have dedicated websites listing hours and services, while others have brochures, fliers or hours of operation posted at the physical location. Not all online information is accurate and up-to-date, making it difficult from a client standpoint to gain a complete and accurate view of the food pantry landscape.

When asked if it would be useful for pantries to consolidate efforts, staff, funding or other resources, the responses were varied: Some pantries expressed interest in thinking about it, while others surmised that the individualism of various food pantries may present a barrier to consolidation. OFB has addressed many of these issues by having both a toll-free number to call to get food pantry information, as well as a website where people can put in their ZIP code to find the food pantry that will serve them.

Some best-practice recommendations aimed at addressing these issues included providing an up-to-date map of public transportation that shows the locations, dates and times for soup kitchens and food pantries. This idea is aligned with the interest that food pantry staff has expressed in making their services more visible in the community, despite not being certain about how to accomplish this task.

For example, SonBridge, whose mission is to address unmet needs in the community, acknowledged it could do more to advertise its services and is interested in taking measures to increase its community presence. Other solutions are aimed at getting all the players in the food system to talk to each other and to align and consolidate services.

Across the board, speakers said that more marketing and information is needed. It was stated that only 15 percent of homeless veterans know how to obtain food at places other than the daily breakfast and dinner available at the Christian Aid Center, which reveals the limited effect of current marketing efforts.

In addition, marketing effectively to senior citizens about food access options can be problematic, as newspaper ads are too costly for organizations to place and seniors are less likely to use social media. The Walla Walla County Health Department has recognized the community's need for more information and is currently working on a brochure of food resources.

Those who can't access food pantries for whatever reason may not be meeting their nutritional needs.

MENTAL HEALTH

Multiple Community Council study committee presenters commented that people's mental health and motivation to become self-sufficient is a key factor in moving from food insecurity to food security. Because mental illness, including depression, is often behind closed doors, issues of hunger may remain hidden and therefore unaddressed for those who

are in need.

A Walla Walla Public School intervention specialist explained that for people whose lives are in a state of chaos or crisis, including issues of mental illness, making healthy food choices is not high on the hierarchy of needs. Food choice is more about comfort, familiarity and control than about having access to healthy food. In order for healthy food to become a priority, the chaos or crisis in people's lives must first be resolved.

The intervention specialist noted that for those families who are eligible for social programs but do not use them to help meet nutritional needs, the major issues preventing benefit usage are mental health, substance abuse, exhaustion from working multiple jobs, and lack of knowledge about healthy food choices or preparation.

LOWER-THAN-ELIGIBLE FOOD ASSISTANCE ENROLLMENT NUMBERS

The social stigma related to using food assistance programs can be a barrier to applying for benefits. For example, SNAP usage is lower among seniors, who are less likely to apply for assistance due to the social stigma.

In addition, the presenters said that those who can't access food pantries for whatever reason may not be meeting their nutritional needs. Preschool children and the elderly are particularly vulnerable groups in this regard. Also vulnerable are those who lack identification cards, which are required to determine eligibility for food assistance benefits. Also, youth who have run away from home due to abuse are reluctant to go to soup kitchens and are vulnerable to food insecurity.

STUDENT-SPECIFIC ISSUES

As noted, compared with Washington state overall, the Community Council's region has above-average free and reduced-price meal numbers. The number of public school students eligible for free and reduced-price meals indicates a high incidence of food insecurity. Various programs and initiatives have sought to provide meals beyond at-school breakfast and lunch:

- ▶ Blue Ridge Elementary School has a supper program, and WWPS plans to expand that program to other schools.

- ▶ WWPS provides an afternoon snack for students involved in after-school activities.
- ▶ In the summer, Walla Walla Parks and Recreation, in cooperation with WWPS, provides a total of 800 to 1,000 meals for children. According to Donna Blankinship, of *The Seattle Times*, "Washington state ranks 40th out of the 50 states for availability of summer food programs."

At Blue Ridge, the school staff observed that K-5 students intentionally overeat and stock up on Fridays to address food shortages at home over the weekends. All WWPS students have the option to eat

breakfast and lunch at school. High school students have the option to leave their campus for lunch.

Many high school students choose to go without food rather than have parents apply for free and reduced-price meals, either because they are concerned about a stigma of receiving free and reduced-price meals or because they prefer to eat off-campus. Because high school students may not be eating school breakfasts or are skipping lunches, they may be at greater risk for not having their nutritional needs met.

SIGNIFICANCE OF MAKING FOOD CHOICES

While clients stated they felt they had little choice in selecting their apportioned foods from food pantries, the presenters representing the food pantries maintain that they do provide clients with a variety of food choices. The types of food choices from different food pantries vary.

While SonBridge is not a food pantry, it does provide vouchers for Andy's Market and Grocery Outlet to address special dietary needs, lost income and emergencies. Pantry Shelf has a form on which clients can indicate food preferences from among the foods available. The Salvation Army also provides choice via a shopping-style approach to food selection, as well as food shopping coaches who assist clients in selecting appropriate foods and learning how to prepare them.

OFB accepts only food pantry affiliates that provide shopping-style, choice-based food distribution. A benefit of providing choice is that only foods that will be eaten are selected, which minimizes food waste.



Pillar 3 FOOD USE



In the context of improving food security, food use involves being able to effectively select, store, prepare and process nutritious food.

Some people who rely on food assistance programs, such as SNAP, WIC or food pantry supplements, lack food utilization knowledge or skills. This is particularly true in relation to being able to use non-processed foods that must be prepared from scratch, including fresh produce and dried staples. Often, lack of knowledge leads to food waste because clients receive, but may not use, food they do not know how to prepare.

Clients also may lack necessary cooking and food storage equipment (such as freezers, standard-size refrigerators, containers, shelving, and preparation equipment or facilities), which presents additional food security barriers. Some food pantries, such as St. Vincent de Paul, provide clients with kitchenware (pots and pans, coffee pots, etc.) so that they can better prepare food. Bread Basket supplies clients with items such as can openers, which are useful particularly for homeless clients.

Allowing clients to choose their own food helps to address waste and is viewed as a largely positive approach. Some of the benefits of choice include:

- ▶ Respects dietary preferences and health needs.
- ▶ Is a more dignified way for clients to receive food.
- ▶ Helps clients gain experience making food choices.
- ▶ Helps clients plan menus around their own choices and needs.

- ▶ Allows clients to select foods that will work with their preferences, cooking abilities and kitchen equipment.

Food pantry staff has noted demographic trends regarding which foods will be selected when choice is offered: Older clients and Latinos are more likely to select whole foods (rice, grains, beans, etc.), while young Caucasians tend to choose processed foods (Hamburger Helper, macaroni and cheese, etc.).

There was some discrepancy in self-reported client preferences. While some clients reported a preference for whole foods, food pantries reported that when the majority of people are asked what they prefer, they most often request sweets and processed foods. Christian Aid Center noted that young parents in particular seem to lack knowledge about what to feed their children and often choose high-sugar foods because their children like it and will eat it.

At food pantries in general, food that requires preparation and cooking is less likely to be selected than food that does not require much preparation. Helpline was open to the idea of having an independent group, such as the local Walla Walla Community College (WWCC) Culinary Arts, take whole foods and prepare them, making them shelf-stable for consumer use. Dan Thiessen, of the WWCC Culinary Arts program, expressed interest in this practice as a way to utilize foods nearing expiration and excess food that, unless immediately processed, would go to waste.

The Salvation Army's new facility includes a kitchen for cooking demonstrations and provides clients help

Findings



with their grocery shopping by allowing them to select their own food from what is available at the pantry. Other area food pantries have cited The Salvation Army's kitchen programs and approaches as a model to follow. The Salvation Army recognizes that clients need knowledge and skills to address nearly every level of nutrition issues—from planting a garden, to planning a meal, to knowing how to access available resources.

Providing these tools and information can take many forms:

- ▶ Provide information, such as recipes and storage tips, to help food recipients make the best use of the food they receive.
- ▶ Follow a model practiced by Oregon State University, which provides consolidated information about food systems, nutrition education, SNAP benefits, food safety and basic things to cook on a budget.
- ▶ Provide simple recipes and preparation tips with the food

to strengthen client utilization practices and further minimize waste. When pantries have foods that clients are not familiar with, providing samples or recipes using those foods encourages consumption of those products.

Cooking classes held as part of an after-school program, with attendance encouraged by inviting families to cook together and share the meals they prepare, could impart valuable life skills.

- ▶ Hold classes that teach focused skills:
 - The Salvation Army conducts nutrition education classes with community volunteer chefs. These classes teach clients how to plan a menu and prepare the types of foods available at the pantry. Other classes address nutritional specifics related to issues like childhood diabetes.
 - The Walla Walla Housing Authority holds cooking classes and provides incentives (such as early access to commodities distribution) for those who attend. The Salvation Army, SonBridge and St. Paul's Episcopal Church also have kitchens that can be used to teach cooking skills.
 - Impact classes, sponsored by SonBridge, teach life-coping employment and interview skills, as well as other skills necessary to become food-secure.
 - Cooking classes held as part of an after-school program, with attendance encouraged by inviting families to cook together and share the meals they prepare, could impart valuable life skills.
 - Recognizing the true shelf life of

food (as opposed to expiration dates printed on the packages) helps minimize food waste.

- Classes that give garden tips, cooking demos, recipes and other food-related information can help address issues of utilization, access and availability. The Salvation Army has garden plots and intends to use them to teach people how to garden, harvest and prepare garden-fresh foods.
- Food education, both in general and specifically about foods considered unmarketable due to cosmetic blemishes, is an effective way to reduce waste and increase consumption of healthy food.

Early adoption of healthy eating practices and food utilization skills has long-term benefits. Multiple organizations either support or provide classes for people to acquire a range of food utilization skills at a young age. WWPS is trying to introduce more foods cooked from scratch and is offering school programs, like Farm to School, that introduce students at a young age to a variety of foods.

The Community Garden at Assumption teaches young single mothers gardening skills to support self-sufficiency and improve nutrition. This early introduction is important in shaping eating habits, awareness, and attitudes toward fresh fruits and vegetables.

Growing Veterans has seen that education about nutrition and adopting healthier attitudes toward food is particularly effective with children and begins by getting their hands in the soil. The Farm to School program in WWPS supports the idea of early introduction of

food utilization skills and fresh food experience, including gardening and cooking practices. Farm to School Coordinator Beth Thiel stated that students are more likely to eat the foods they have cooked and investigated, which establishes a strong foundation for making healthier dietary choices long-term. The Farm to School's school garden program introduces elementary students to a variety of fruits and vegetables, as well as to gardening, and teaches children to cook fresh things simply.

Another positive program is the Washington State Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program, currently at Blue Ridge, which introduces students to a variety of fruits and vegetables from around the world every week. One strong Farm to School model noted by Thiel is Abernathy Elementary School in Portland, which supports a food investigation curriculum implemented at every grade.

Food education programs and providing awareness by modeling healthy food at schools represent effective long-term strategies in supporting food security:

- ▶ Pioneer and Garrison Middle Schools hold after-school cooking classes.
- ▶ Lincoln High School staff stated a need for increased funding to purchase higher-quality foods needed to better model healthy eating.
- ▶ Lincoln High School staff believes its lunch program needs to more effectively model healthy food behavior. In general, students who have low self-worth have difficulty cultivating healthy nutritional habits.

- ▶ The Salvation Army provides cooking classes for children.
- ▶ Clients have suggested that providing after-school cooking courses for students at which students and their families can eat what has been prepared would be an effective way to encourage program participation while instilling important skills.
- ▶ Food pantries donate produce to schools for students to take home, which introduces fresh produce to those who will one day be consumers.
- ▶ Because 27 percent of food pantry clients are children, when food pantries send produce home with clients, they help to encourage and support healthier diets with positive long-term effects.

Some of the presenters for the Improving Food Security Study (including The Salvation Army, SonBridge, St. Paul's Episcopal Church kitchen and WWPS) stated that they either have facilities that could be used to teach cooking classes or programs already in place for this purpose. The Veterans Affairs (VA) Hospital has a kitchen regulated under federal guidelines and has expressed interest in working with the community to help teach critical skills. Further, Growing Veterans, a potential partner organization, is interested in establishing a community garden outpost in Walla Walla.

Each of these organizations recognizes that while learning the skills is important, the community aspect of sharing food is also a significant form of support.

Findings



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Conclusions

1. Food insecurity is a symptom of larger issues and cannot be solved long term without addressing root causes, such as poverty, mental health, joblessness, isolation and lack of education. Both short- and long-term approaches are needed.
2. Addressing hunger by distributing food is a necessary short-term strategy, though by itself it is not enough to achieve food security.
3. It is important to educate the public about the complexities of and access to living-wage jobs in our region.
4. Washington state is among the six states where hunger is growing the fastest, which is related to poverty. Regionally, the number of people needing food help is growing. The average income in our region has been decreasing during the past five years.
5. Food security and income share a positive correlation. Those with living-wage jobs are more likely to achieve long-term food security. Low-income jobs are a double burden because of the lack of money to buy food and the lack of time to obtain and to cook food. People need help obtaining living-wage employment.
6. Having a college education is a predictor of food security. Creating or supporting pathways to college positively impacts educational attainment and can greatly reduce food insecurity.
7. Public communication from meal providers and food pantries is essential to successfully reaching clients and the public. Networking among all people who work in the food chain system is also essential. The current communication level does not fully connect communities to food resource information, or food providers to each other.
8. Isolated individuals are more likely to be food-insecure. Both formal and informal support networks are important in addressing issues of isolation. Creating a single portal of formal networks to disseminate information would strengthen connections, as would supporting informal community building approaches, such as gatherings with friends and neighbors, community gardening, and sharing meals. These networks can have the added advantage for seniors of extending the time they can remain in their own homes.
9. Backyard, community and school gardens promote a nutritious diet while increasing food access and availability, self-sufficiency and food education. A source of fresh produce for food pantries can come from home and community gardens.



Conclusions

- 10.** Most of the food grown in the Community Council region is shipped elsewhere for distribution and sale, so only a small portion of locally produced food is available for local purchase. The region lacks a full-scale food co-op and food hub where locally produced food is aggregated and available for large- and small-scale distribution.
- 11.** Gleaning reduces food waste and increases local food availability. However, the practice of gleaning is obstructed by legal liability issues at large farm operations and by difficulties organizing timely gleaning for individual yard and small-scale operations.
- 12.** There are many food deserts in the Community Council's region, especially in the more rural areas, where there are limited choices, higher prices and fewer nutritious options.
- 13.** Public transportation issues present food-access difficulties. Limited bus schedules and lack of routes that go directly by food pantries limit access. In addition, physical barriers, such as walls between residential areas and stores and a lack of crosswalks, limit pedestrian access.
- 14.** Lack of affordable, convenient ways to transport food from stores and food pantries can prevent people from accessing food and services. Food pantry clients struggle to transport the food they are given, as it is usually too much to carry independently from point of pickup to their homes. Personal food carts can reduce the burden of transporting food home.
- 15.** The Community Council region is viewed as generous in terms of services provided by area food pantries, which each operate independently with different days and hours of operation.
- 16.** Clients have noted difficulties in being required to access three different pantries once per month, each with different times, days and practices. Additionally, limited hours of operation present a challenge for some clients.
- 17.** Food pantry clients have unmet nutrition needs, as items such as infant formula, baby food and fresh produce are not consistently available at pantries.
- 18.** Food pantries rely heavily on volunteers for their operations, but they may not have enough volunteers, and this may limit their hours.
- 19.** Food pantry clients are required to register at Helpline, which may present an obstacle to accessing food pantry benefits. Subsequent, required monthly visits to Helpline for ongoing screening present an obstacle for clients. Oregon Food Bank, considered a model program, has no required means test for clients.
- 20.** There are compelling, multiple advantages of providing food pantry clients with the ability to choose their food in a conventional shopping experience.
- 21.** There has not been a significant study of food needs in the region. Both quantitative and qualitative information are useful in learning about the needs of food-insecure people, as are effective feedback loops between food pantries and clients. Many models of assessing client needs and approaches to meeting those needs exist, including OFB's Voices project.
- 22.** There are many ways to measure the effectiveness of strategies that seek to achieve food security.

- 23.** Social stigma can prevent people from getting help addressing issues of food insecurity, and they can limit enrollment in SNAP and WIC. The language and attitudes that surround the need for services can reinforce this stigma. Those in need of assistance, which includes maintaining motivation, require support rather than stigmatization.
- 24.** Mental health and food security are reciprocally linked: Mental health issues interfere with people's ability to access food, and food insecurity can contribute to isolation and depression. Those with mental health problems are especially vulnerable to food insecurity.
- 25.** The most vulnerable food insecure populations—children, seniors and people with disabilities—are also the hardest to reach with marketing and may lack the ability to independently access food resources.
- 26.** For students who live in unstable situations, the backpacks with emergency provisions serve an important function.
- 27.** This region has a high percentage of students eligible for free and reduced-price meals in schools, including after-school snacks and dinners at some schools, in addition to breakfast and lunch. The rates of those accessing these meals are increasing.
- 28.** School meal programs should model healthy, nutritious choices because instilling positive nutrition habits early in children significantly impacts lifelong habits.
- 29.** Students from food insecure families depend more on school meal programs to meet their nutritional requirements.
- 30.** Innovative shopping and retail methods can help address food insecurity issues (such as selling food on a sliding scale according to income and selling unmarketable but edible food at reduced prices).
- 31.** Educating people about true expiration dates and edibility of food with cosmetic imperfections can reduce waste.
- 32.** Lack of knowledge about how to budget and shop for, prepare, preserve, and store food is an obstacle to achieving food security. Food education classes in schools and the community that teach skills such as budgeting, shopping, cooking, preserving and gardening convey essential information. Teaching food preservation practices helps reduce food waste, encourages self-sufficiency and makes local food available beyond the harvest season. There are a number of underutilized commercial kitchens in the community that could be used to help teach cooking skills.
- 33.** The Farm to School program teaches students about food, nutrition and agriculture, and it supports local economies by buying directly from local producers.
- 34.** Adequate food preparation tools, storage equipment and facilities are needed to realize food security. Lack of cooking equipment and facilities limit the foods that people can utilize.
- 35.** Food pantries expressed interest in having shelf-stable foods that are prepared from food nearing expiration and from food that clients find difficult to prepare.
- 36.** Increasing the value and acceptance of WIC and SNAP vouchers at farmers markets is beneficial.





Steps for improving food security

Recommendations are the study committee's specific suggestions for change, based on the findings and conclusions. They are listed without prioritization.

- 1.** Perform a statistically sound study to determine food security needs in the region, and determine assessment milestones, thresholds and targets to measure effectiveness of methods in increasing food security.
- 2.** Create opportunities for all food chain players to connect around

issues of food insecurity in order to coordinate services; understand needs, challenges and opportunities; align local food production to opportunities for local food distribution; and collaborate when possible. Food chain players encompass a wide spectrum: food producers, laborers, distributors, gleaners, merchants, consumers, pantry clients,

food handlers, etc. Oregon Food Bank's Food, Education, Agriculture Solutions Together (FEAST) model provides a useful approach.

- 3.** Support the best ways for food banks, food pantries, community meal providers and referral organizations to meet client needs:
 - a. Determine whether means-testing is necessary. If so, substantiate which methods of determination and frequency of reassessment are optimal.
 - b. Interview clients to determine underlying food insecurity issues, and work to address those specific needs.
 - c. Establish consistent, convenient distribution processes.
 - d. Assess and coordinate policies, hours, locations and food resource information that best meet client needs.
 - e. Centralize all food resource information (organizations, services, volunteer opportunities, events, pantry needs, etc.) in a common portal. Make information available through multiple media and languages, ensuring that key community players (mental health workers, county health, schools, etc.) have the information to distribute to those in need.
 - f. Provide employee and volunteer training about food insecurity issues.
 - g. Expand food education classes for pantry clients, including life-skill classes and information to improve the strategies clients use to plan for, procure, utilize and store food.
 - h. Implement a shopping-style approach for client food distribution.

- i. Improve communications to inform the public about services provided and needs for food donations, tools, equipment and volunteers.
 - j. Help eligible clients enroll in WIC to meet infant nutritional needs, and provide infant formula and baby food to fill the gaps during the WIC application process.
 - k. Educate food pantry clients and workers about true versus printed expiration dates of foods.
- 4.** Provide ways for food-pantry clients to conveniently access food pantries and transport food home. This includes aligning bus route stops and pantry locations.
 - 5.** Provide community-focused, food-chain job training, volunteer opportunities and classes for food-insecure people.
 - a. Determine which clients would benefit from participating in activities that would help provide long-term solutions (for example, volunteering to acquire job skills and letters of recommendation, and taking classes to build skills or strengthen community networks).
 - b. For chronically food-insecure clients who are able to attend classes or volunteer, encourage participation. Provide clients who participate with transportable tools for moving forward (skills, references, professional experiences, etc.).
 - 6.** Establish, promote and fund programs that help to strengthen community and neighborhood networks, including cooking and food education classes, meal sharing, community gardening, and gatherings.
 - a. Support individual and community garden efforts by identifying possible community garden locations; providing classes, outreach, and food donation and utilization information; and creating incentives for innovative garden solutions that improve food security.
 - b. Inventory local commercial kitchens that can be used for congregate opportunities around food.
 - 7.** Engage the Port, colleges, job centers, elected officials and local legislators in educating the public (including employers) about barriers and possible solutions to getting and keeping living-wage jobs and the advantages of providing living-wage employment.
 - 8.** Encourage food pantries and banks to explore working with organizations such as the WWCC culinary department to create shelf-stable foods using foods approaching their expiration date.
 - 9.** Improve rural and remote areas' ability to access nutritious food by supporting healthy retail points, expanded options, mobile retail food trucks and mobile food pantries.
 - a. Widen mobile food programs, such as Meals on Wheels, to serve seniors in rural, remote and food-desert areas.
 - b. Address urgent situations by providing emergency food and provisions to meet gaps.
 - 10.** Work with school districts to identify barriers to providing and promoting fresh-cooked, nutritious school meals, and work to ensure that all school-provided meals are highly nutritious.
 - a. Encourage school districts to expand, develop and implement Farm to School programs as part of an integrated-curriculum approach.
 - b. Broaden the emergency backpack program, including organization and funding.
 - 11.** Increase public awareness to the broader community about food insecurity issues and resources in the region. Recognize that the language surrounding food assistance affects social perceptions and client willingness to access services. Where language conveys negativity, provide other options.
 - 12.** Pursue innovative retail approaches, including selling low-cost food that would otherwise go to waste.
 - 13.** Explore the viability of increasing the value and acceptance of WIC and SNAP vouchers at farmers markets.
 - 14.** Investigate an expanded gleaning program that teaches proper harvest, transport and utilization methods; has a community service component; receives gleaning opportunity information; and coordinates gleanings. The program may include certification.
 - 15.** Develop relationships with city and county planners to identify and resolve the built-environment obstacles that consumers face in safely accessing food sources.

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- ▶ Kirsten Archer
Walla Walla County Health Department
- ▶ Roger Bairstow
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- ▶ Nora Bleth
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Growing Veterans
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- ▶ Kathy Covey
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- ▶ Kenneth B. Wells Trust

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