

**Food Insecurity in the Face of Growth:  
Examining Structural Drivers and Organizational Responses in Gallatin County**

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## **1. Introduction**

Gallatin County is one of the fastest-growing regions in Montana, attracting new residents and investment while driving up housing and living costs (BBER, 2023). As expenses rise, a wide range of residents struggle to meet basic needs, with food often the first necessity sacrificed. Local food assistance programs now serve a far more diverse demographic than commonly assumed, making community-based organizations (CBOs) essential to the county's social safety net. Yet as demand grows, questions emerge about how organizations adapt to new pressures, how they coordinate with one another, and what gaps persist in local responses.

This research examines how providers in Gallatin County understand and respond to food insecurity amid rising living costs. It focuses on the strategies CBOs employ to meet changing demand and the challenges of coordination within a rapidly growing community. Our findings show that rising living costs have intensified food insecurity in ways that extend beyond food access alone: systemic barriers shape who experiences food insecurity, affecting a wide cross-section of residents and placing increasing strain on local organizational capacity. As a result, meaningful solutions must address deeper structural factors, such as housing, education, and stigma, rather than relying solely on emergency food systems to meet expanding needs.

## **2. Literature Review: National, State, & Local Contexts**

### **2.1. Housing Insecurity & Cost of Living**

Cost of living has far outpaced household income growth in recent decades, intensifying housing insecurity. Experts recommend that housing should not consume more than 30% of household income (Herbert et al., 2017), yet Habitat for Humanity reports that one in three U.S. families exceed this threshold, with nearly one in six households paying over half of their income on a place to live (*What is Housing Affordability?*, n.d.). Research shows that housing

affordability and food insecurity are deeply intertwined, with housing burdens forcing trade-offs between rent, groceries, healthcare, and other essentials (DeParle, 2023; Heston, 2023).

Since COVID-19, Gallatin County has seen a sharp decline in housing affordability (BBER, 2023). An influx of higher-income earners has driven demand beyond supply, displacing long-term locals and inflating the overall cost of living (BBER, 2023; EPS, 2024). Notably, about 40% of unhoused individuals accessing HRDC shelter report employment income, while many others report being physically unable to work (Batura, 2025). This illustrates that housing insecurity in Gallatin County is simply a consequence of unemployment, but a product of structural barriers that make stability unattainable even for employed residents. It also exposes gaps in existing safety nets, particularly for those with disabilities whose needs are not adequately met by current systems. In Gallatin County, structural pressures shape not only who becomes housing insecure but also who turns to community-based food assistance for support.

## **2.2. Food Insecurity & Community Food Assistance Systems**

Experts define food insecurity as the uncertainty of acquiring sufficient food to meet the needs of all household members due to a lack of money or resources at times during the year (ERS, 2025; Loofbourrow & Scherr, 2023). In 2023, Montana's food insecurity rate was 12.3%, with Gallatin County at 9.9%, representing over 12,000 residents (Feeding America, 2025).

Barriers to food access occur at both individual and community levels. Individuals may be impacted by inadequate income, health limitations, disability, limited time or resources for meal preparation, or lack of kitchen facilities (MSU Extension, n.d.). Locally, access may be limited by the absence of nearby grocery retailers offering nutritious food, poor transportation infrastructure, or insufficient school meal programs (MSU Extension, n.d.).

Households with children, limited transportation, or persistent food insecurity depend

heavily on community-based charitable food assistance (CFA). Nationally, more than 60% of CFA clients report using these services as a long-term strategy to make ends meet (Fan et al., 2021). These findings highlight both the essential role of local food assistance programs and the ongoing need to expand them for households who fall outside the scope of traditional federal aid programs with restrictive income guidelines.

In Gallatin County, the Human Resource Development Council’s (HRDC) Community Commons includes a food pantry, the “pay-what-you-can” Fork & Spoon café, and nutrition education specifically designed to serve individuals who fall through the cracks of federal and state assistance (HRDC, n.d.). Despite these efforts, demand continues to rise: the number of first-time households served by local food banks increased from 1,190 in the 2022–2023 fiscal year to nearly 1,735 in 2023–2024 (HRDC, 2024), even as federal funding cuts reduced available food supply (Lutey, 2025). Although the county benefits from strong community partnerships and rich agricultural resources, fresh and local foods often remain financially inaccessible to low- and middle-income residents (Lawrence, 2023). This underscores a critical service gap, many residents are food insecure not because resources do not exist, but because existing programs do not fully support those just above eligibility thresholds. As a result, CBOs are left to fill these gaps, placing an undue burden to piece together new funding and strategies for support.

### **2.3. Our Contribution**

While research documents the relationship between high living costs and increased reliance on local housing and food assistance programs, far less is known about how local providers coordinate their efforts in these contexts. This study addresses that gap by examining how food assistance providers in Gallatin County understand, collaborate, and adapt to meet rising community needs. Our guiding research question is: *How have Gallatin County’s food*

*assistance programs evolved in response to rapid growth and affordability challenges?*

*Additionally: In what ways do CBOs coordinate—or fail to coordinate—food security efforts?*

### **3. Methodological Design**

#### **3.1. Research Design**

A qualitative research design was employed with personnel in Gallatin County who had a role working or volunteering with a CBO. Six participants were recruited using purposive sampling (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2025). Participants were approached by a member of the research team, provided with information about the study, and invited to participate. Those who agreed were interviewed in-person or through an online platform such as Zoom. Participants were read a consent form before agreeing to take part in the study, and assured that their confidentiality would be protected.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted by a graduate research student with experience facilitating qualitative interviews. An interview guide was developed with questions pertaining to the diversity of food insecurity experiences, systematic barriers, and organizational adaptations. Interviews lasted about 30 minutes, were audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim.

#### **3.2. Data Collection & Analysis**

Interviews were transcribed using an online transcription tool, then cleaned by the interviewer for accuracy. A thematic analysis of the transcripts was conducted using a general inductive approach (Creswell, 2025). Three members of the research team independently read and coded the transcripts to develop initial codes. Codes were then refined through an iterative process that involved independent coding, re-reading transcripts, and in-depth discussion among the research team. A code book was developed, and the research team reviewed and discussed the codes until a consensus was reached on a final set of themes.

## **4. Findings**

### **4.1. Diversity of Food Insecure Population**

Food assistance programs in Gallatin County serve a diverse population, with certain groups, based on socioeconomic or situational factors, facing increased vulnerability. Commonly mentioned populations by interviewees included college students, older adults, working individuals, families with children, people with limited English proficiency or international backgrounds, as well as unhoused or low-income community members. Participants described the demographic landscape as broad and continually evolving, with one interviewee noting, “There’s a lot of different demographics of folks that are seeking food assistance.” Several interviewees observed that students frequently rely on campus resources when finances become strained, and that older adults remain a notable portion of those seeking assistance. Others highlighted shifts in need that emerged during and after COVID-19, particularly among families with children and older adults who experienced increased financial uncertainty. Interviewees pointed to changes in specific populations, reporting growth in the number of individuals seeking assistance who have limited English proficiency, particularly Spanish speakers. Overall, the collective interviews reflect a community experiencing both increasing need and increasing diversity among those who utilize food assistance resources.

### **4.2. Systematic Barriers and the Impact of Conflicting Priorities**

Local food access is shaped by intersecting economic, social, and temporal constraints. Even when food is available, systemic pressures and everyday tradeoffs can make healthy, consistent eating patterns difficult to sustain. Interviewees described a wide range of barriers that undermine food security, including high living costs, restrictive living conditions, time limitations, lack of transportation, language barriers, limited culinary skills, seasonal access

challenges, and a general lack of awareness about available services and how to access them.

Across interviews, high cost of living emerged as the most significant barrier to food security in Gallatin County. As one participant noted, “Rent is really high...a lot of people can't keep up with those [bills], let alone have leftover money to actually access and purchase healthy food options.” These expenses force residents to make difficult trade-offs between housing, food, healthcare, and childcare. They also push many to work longer hours or commute from more affordable areas outside of city centers, reducing the time available to access or prepare food. Restrictive food bank hours and limited transportation, particularly during winter months when road conditions are poor, further compound these challenges for already strained households.

Interviewees also highlighted social and cultural barriers disproportionately affecting students, older adults, non-native English speakers, and Indigenous populations. Those with low English proficiency face barriers related to language, paperwork, and trust, underscoring the need to adapt services and recruit bilingual volunteers. For many college-aged students and older adults, limited food-preparation knowledge reduces the usability of nutritious foods, making less healthy, more expensive, or more “culinarily simple” options the default. For students, food insecurity reflects a combination of financial strain, limited food-preparation skills, lack of cooking equipment, and difficulty navigating unfamiliar food environments. For older adults, changes in household size, the loss of a partner, and reduced mobility can disrupt established routines and make cooking more burdensome or costly.

One interviewee stressed that Indigenous students face heightened food insecurity due to structural changes in their environment when transitioning to MSU. Many move from multigenerational households or reservations—where food access and preparation are shared—to Bozeman, where they must navigate unfamiliar food systems, fewer social supports, and limited

financial stability. She explained, “They may have more things available, but that doesn't mean they know how to use them or that those are the things they're looking for.” This displacement from cultural foodways, paired with limited income and high living costs, makes Indigenous students particularly vulnerable to food insecurity despite living in a resource-rich county.

These insights illustrate that food insecurity in Gallatin County is not merely a matter of affordability. It is shaped by structural inequities, cultural dislocation, and access barriers that fall unevenly across demographics—especially those with intersecting identities such as Indigenous students and families for whom language or transportation limits access to support systems.

#### **4.3. Organizational and Community Adaptations**

As a result of increased need for food access, community providers have organized in a multitude of ways to accommodate. Some commonalities in interviewees' responses to closing this disparity are through means of partnerships, education, infrastructure and service growth, and innovative adaptations. Most frequently referenced by the respondents were local partnerships, with one interviewee stating, “These partnerships, these collaborations, especially in rural spaces, look different in every community, but they're really unique in terms of how they bring in partners that you wouldn't always think of as food partners.” Locally, these collaborative efforts take the form of a more systematic approach, acknowledging that the issue is not a lack of food but rather a broken system that prevents people from accessing it. As a response, the Gallatin County community cultivates relationships across unlikely partners, including churches, sheriffs, libraries, and even sports teams. Examples of these collaborations include the Bike Kitchen providing refurbished bicycles to improve community members' transportation access; Love Inc. preparing and serving Sunday meals at the food bank to support families experiencing food insecurity; and local agricultural coordination efforts to collect surplus harvests from



personal gardens. These partnerships illustrate how organizations leverage their unique strengths to meet community needs and reduce resource gaps, improve community ownership, and tackle the issue more holistically.

#### **4.4. Resource Constraints and Systemic Interdependence**

Gallatin County's local food landscape is shaped by intersecting pressures related to capacity, funding, and rapid population growth. CBOs make efforts to adapt and expand in order to serve a larger capacity, although resource constraints present a growing challenge that often results in uneven service provision and gaps in support.

Participants identified strain on staff and volunteers as a central challenge. Many CBOs operate with minimally paid staff and rely heavily on volunteers, placing disproportionate responsibility on a small number of individuals and creating inevitable issues in communication and continuity. One participant described the constant cycle of "recruiting and training new people" as an added burden for staff already overwhelmed by daily operational demands.

Interviewees also noted that staffing shortages can extend beyond internal operations and affect collaboration across sectors. Overwhelmed public-sector employees often lack the capacity to effectively coordinate with private and nonprofit partners, resulting in missed opportunities for information sharing and joint programming. These dynamics illustrate how burnout at the organizational level impacts the broader service network, weakening the overall safety net.

Limited funding further compounds capacity challenges. Interviewees noted that federal and county-level funding gaps force organizations to make difficult decisions about which services to prioritize. As one participant explained, reductions in federal program resources over the past year have directly constrained what local CBOs can offer, reducing food variety and limiting the reach of certain programs. These funding shortfalls prevent organizations from

scaling with demand and contribute to service disparities across the county.

As Gallatin County's population continues to rise and programs struggle to scale fast enough, this results in the exclusion of some groups from receiving the assistance they need. One example comes from Bounty of the Bridgers, which recently reduced access for MSU faculty in order to focus limited resources on the growing number of food-insecure students. While necessary, such decisions reveal how resource scarcity forces difficult prioritization decisions, often unintentionally excluding groups who still face significant barriers to food access.

Across interviews, participants stressed that food insecurity cannot be separated from broader systemic issues such as housing affordability, transportation, and education. These interconnected pressures, combined with limited organizational capacity, force CBOs to make difficult decisions about who to support and how. This interdependence reinforces that food insecurity in Gallatin County is not a standalone issue but part of a larger system of structural inequities that requires coordinated, multi-sector solutions to address underlying causes.

#### **4.5. External and Internal Social Perceptions and Stigmas**

Overcoming the negative stigma associated with utilizing food assistance programs remains a major obstacle to equitable food access. Social stigma functions as a powerful barrier that keeps many individuals and families from seeking assistance, even when they meet eligibility criteria or are experiencing significant need. Participants described stigma as both an internalized sense of shame and an external pressure shaped by cultural norms and community perceptions. Across interviews, providers noted that many Montanans hold strong values of pride, independence, and self-reliance—qualities that can make asking for help feel uncomfortable or discouraging. As one participant explained, “People in Montana have a lot of pride, and it can be really hard to ask for help... there's a lot of shame that can come along with

that,” yet there is also “a lot of dignity and agency” in recognizing that support exists and accessing available resources.

CBOs acknowledge that addressing stigma requires more than simply expanding services; it demands shifting the broader narrative about who experiences food insecurity. Many individuals facing hunger do not fit the stereotypes commonly portrayed. By promoting a more accurate understanding of food insecurity, local organizations aim to normalize the use of food assistance programs and reduce the fear of judgment. This narrative change is essential for creating an environment in which individuals and families feel respected, supported, and empowered to seek the help available to them.

## **5. Conclusion and Discussion**

The results of this study suggest that food insecurity and its increasing prevalence in Gallatin County is shaped by rising housing costs, geographic and transportation barriers, linguistic gaps, and constrained organizational capacity. These pressures affect a wide range of residents, from students and older adults to families, unhoused individuals, and community members navigating language or cultural differences. As demand grows, local food assistance programs have worked to adapt through partnerships, service expansion, and creative programming; however, limited funding, staffing shortages, and rapid population growth continue to strain their capacity to respond effectively.

Overall, the findings underscore that food insecurity cannot be addressed through emergency food programs alone. Sustainable progress will require a coordinated approach across housing, transportation, education, and social support systems, reflecting the complex, interconnected nature of the issue. While stronger collaboration helps alleviate immediate needs, these efforts often function as band-aid responses to broader structural challenges. Long-term,

equitable solutions will depend on comprehensive policy and administrative changes that ensure all residents can reliably access nutritious and culturally appropriate food.

At the same time, an integrative theme emerging across interviews points to both the complexity of the problem and the hope found in community-level action. Community-driven initiatives such as Can the Griz and neighborhood-based mutual aid illustrate how these “small wins” foster pride, strengthen social ties, and shift norms around food access. As one interviewee reflected, raising awareness within the local food environment helps community members “humanize this challenge and ask what else they could be doing to support their neighbors.”

Recognizing food insecurity as a systemic issue opens the door to collective, place-based solutions rooted in compassion, cooperation, and shared responsibility. While the challenges are deeply rooted and complex, the actions of local organizations, partners, and community members demonstrate that meaningful change is already underway—and even small steps can build the foundation for broader systemic transformation.

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**Appendix A: Interview Guide**

1. Can you briefly explain your role and the ways you and/or your organization are involved in addressing food access and food security in Gallatin County?
2. What demographics seek assistance the most in Gallatin County (e.g. household type, employment/student status, age, gender)? Has this changed during the time you have been in your role?
  - a. Follow-up: Can you give specific examples of how these changes have occurred over time and in what timeline?
3. In your opinion, what is the most significant barrier preventing people in the community from accessing food?
4. In what ways have food assistance programs in Gallatin County adapted in response to population growth and rising living costs in the last 10 years?
5. Are any local organizations collaborating to address food insecurity at this time?
  - a. Follow-up: What do these collaborations or partnerships look like in practice?
6. Are there any discernible gaps in the local food assistance system (e.g., population served, service delivery, collaboration efforts)?
  - a. Follow-up: Can you provide specific examples?

## Appendix B: Codebook

Code	Sub Code	Definition	Example from Transcript (overlapping codes highlighted)
Demographics	General	Any general comments about demographics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“I would say the demographics are varied. There's a lot of different demographics of folks that are seeking food assistance and also many demographics of folks who could seek food assistance but just aren't..., but it's really varied. We see a lot of older folks. They need support and food assistance as well as college students. So again, it kind of spans the age range.” (B.R.)</li> <li>“I would say the younger and the older are primarily challenged audiences.”</li> <li>“Our food bank is a no barrier food bank. That means that anyone who is in need of food, self-identifying as that, can come and access our services. We serve the entire community.” (A.T.)</li> <li>“individuals, veterans, seniors, really it's the whole gambit.”</li> <li>“Yeah, post COVID, there was a massive spike and it's kind of leveled off a little bit, but the numbers have never gone back down. So, we're staying at those high numbers. I've been in my role for almost two years now, and I've seen it grow a little bit - you look at our post-COVID data, and then now, it is a straight run up.” (A.T.)</li> <li>“The main groups I've seen needing food assistance is probably students; and perhaps also lower income working families, the indigenous community, as well as international or seasonal workers, or international students.” (W.Z.)</li> </ul>
	College Students		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“I would say maybe I get one college student a Monday. So we don't have as many young folks as I would imagine. I probably would associate that with the assistance the university provides to students on campus, which is a wonderful thing.” (D.E.)</li> <li>“College students have access to [food assistance at] universities, so that kind of knocks them out [in terms of utilizing HRDC's food bank]. So you look at the two extremes in terms of age [college students and older adults], they're mostly excluded from what I see on a regular basis, just because they're provided for through other programs or other facilities altogether.” (D.E.)</li> <li>“We see a lot of older folks. They need support and food assistance as well as college students.” (B.R.)</li> <li>“College students, especially indigenous college students here at MSU, their rates of food insecurity have increased.” (B.R.)</li> <li>“I think students especially rely on campus pantry when money gets tight, right? Because over the years those patterns haven't really changed too much. But, I think students probably.” (W.Z.)</li> </ul>
	Older Adults	65ish+	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“Yeah, we have a couple older folks. You know, the HRDC does senior groceries once a month. Folks can come pick up a pretty large crate of groceries that are specifically for senior citizens, you know, for older folks living at home. And it's like 50-50 between the elderly folks themselves coming to pick it up or somebody on their behalf coming to pick it up. So that knocks out a good portion of that demographic as far as utilizing the food bank on a regular basis.” (D.E.)</li> <li>“We see a lot of older folks. They need support and food assistance...” (B.R.)</li> </ul>
	Working	Employed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“Even people with steady jobs and who are professional workers are</li> </ul>

	people	full-time, part-time, or seasonally	<p>really feeling it. “ (W.Z.)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “People, people living outside of Bozeman, or working long hours, they often struggle to reach the pantry because of the limitation on transportations or their working condition” (W.Z.)</li> </ul>
	Families		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “We did see another demographic shift during Covid as the number of families with children and older senior citizens found themselves in uncertain financial situations.” (S.G.)</li> <li>• “The two most prominent demographics I see at a superficial level are families and members of the homeless community” (D.E.)</li> <li>• “We exist in a town that is extremely expensive to live in, so a lot of individuals, families, community members, they make too much money to qualify for other assistance programs, but they're still living paycheck to paycheck or they're one bad situation away from being in a really nasty financial situation or potentially even homeless.” (A.T.)</li> <li>• “Within that, we do serve a lot of families.” (A.T.)</li> </ul>
	Non-English speaking	Nonproficient	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “A lot of the Hispanic families are shopping for like seven or eight folks. At least the Spanish-speaking Hispanic families. And then most of my familiar faces, I see them every Monday, are going to be those Hispanic families that are coming once every two weeks.” (D.E.)</li> <li>• “I really appreciate that they've [HRDC] done a very good job incorporating and welcoming in the Hispanic community in Gallatin County. We've seen a huge spike in that population over the past decade.” (D.E.)</li> <li>• “We've seen a vast increase in our LEP, so limited English proficiency, and Hispanic population” (A.T.)</li> </ul>
	Unhoused or Unstably Housed		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “The two most prominent demographics I see at a superficial level are families and members of the homeless community here in town, which tend to be single entities.” (D.E.)</li> <li>• “Most of my familiar faces, I see them every Monday...it's going to be the same folks that are staying at the warming center that are normally rolling solo.” (D.E.)</li> <li>• “I would say some big groups, having recently been to somewhere like HRDC, is that we have a lot of unhoused folks or folks with unstable housing” (B.R.)</li> </ul>
	International		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Many of our international students have trouble finding culturally appropriate foods for their diets, especially at prices they can afford.” (S.G.)</li> <li>• “Perhaps the only change I've seen is because of political and visa restrictions. We're seeing fewer and fewer international students on campus, which is also a group of students that experience high food insecurity.” (W.Z.)</li> </ul>
	Unique groups	(e.g., kinship caregivers, low-income individuals with chronic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Another kind of unique audience that I would speak to as well is kinship caregivers. So it's a relatively small group of folks, but I do research in this area and thinking about housing—kinship caregivers are relatives that are raising relative children, so like grandparents raising grandchildren. And what we primarily support is outside of the foster</li> </ul>

		health conditions)	<p>system. So sometimes they do go through the foster system. If you're in the foster system, you get more access to different assistance programs. But they do qualify even if they're informal caregivers. So it's somebody that says, 'Oh, my daughter dropped off her kids,' or my sister, or sometimes even a teacher that might take in a kid for the summer kind of a thing. They're going to come back, they're going to rehab or something, but now I've got this additional mouth in my home." (B.R.)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Also, another big challenge particularly impacting low-income individuals or demographics with higher health risk food insecurity becomes a comorbidity with diabetes." (B.R.)</li> </ul>
Systemic Barriers and Conflicting Priorities	Cost of Living	(e.g., rent, groceries, medical costs, etc.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "So I think the indigenous college student population, just the college student population in general, I think economically has been increasingly challenged to be able to live here and afford to pay rent, and then get food on top of that." (B.R.)</li> <li>• "I mean, here in Bozeman, I think the biggest barrier is the cost of living. Rent is really high. Groceries bills and utility bills, those are all just going up so fast that a lot of people can't keep up with those, let alone have leftover money to actually access and purchase healthy food options or maybe even food options in general." (W.Z.)</li> </ul>
	Transportation	Access to a vehicle and/or transportation system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Transportation is a big one. We do have our streamline bus service that comes here a couple times a day, but those times aren't always convenient for people." (A.T.)</li> <li>• "Transportation could also be tough. We live in Bozeman, winters are pretty harsh; but even without a weather constraint, things can be a little farther away, especially for people who are living outside of town or without reliable transportation access." (W.Z.)</li> </ul>
	Time Constraints	Preparation and shopping, time availability to resources (e.g., work hours)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "I think once cost and economics come into play, and even in a place where foods are widely accessible, like Gallatin Valley, there's still some things are very expensive and being able to have the time and ability to say, 'I'm going to shop around and go to different stores so that I can get the best price,' that's a privilege and benefit in itself. And so there's still those systemic challenges." (B.R.)</li> <li>• "But I would say recruitment and actually reaching the people that need these supports is sometimes the hardest. Even these classes at HRDC it's hard to get folks to come because they have so many other priorities, time needs, and so while this may be a population that can benefit, knowledge or education is not always the right answer." (B.R.)</li> <li>• "B.R.: This population just doesn't have the time and ability or all the time they need. Like, again, most people know fruits and vegetables are going to be good for you, it's probably better to eat more home-cooked foods than french fries from the fast food restaurant. Interviewer: But one's quicker than the other, more accessible. B.R.: Yes, exactly. And so it's not a knowledge gap— it's all of the other resources and that makes it a hard challenge to solve."</li> <li>• "But I would also say that we quickly move to the larger system of quality of food when it comes to food insecure folks. So what can they afford in terms of the quality of food? That they can have the time—and time being a big factor—whether it's how long does it take them to get across town, is their job allowing them to have time to be home at a meal preparation time to have food as a family—which we know that's</li> </ul>

			<p>going to have additional benefits to them if folks can eat together, for example. But that's a really hard thing to do when you have a household of kids that have different activities and your time doesn't allow you to get home until 8 o'clock at night or you're working shift work" (B.R.)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Also, our hours at the food bank can be restrictive for working families." (A.T.)</li> <li>• "I would also say that we can have some long wait times at the food bank, that can be really challenging as well." (A.T.)</li> </ul>
	Language	Need interpreter, necessary accommodations, comfort level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Most of my familiar faces, I see them every Monday, are going to be those Hispanic families that are coming once every two weeks...I mean, that is just Mondays as well, to be fair, which is why they have me there on Mondays, because of my Spanish speaking, because they had noticed before I came on that that was a particularly voluminous day when it came to folks who spoke Spanish as their native language and it made it difficult at times for some of the older volunteers to communicate properly, kind of what the process was and how the food bank works and why we're asking for a form and a signature and a date—it's not [difficult]; it's not big and scary; it's just the way it is. None of this information goes to anyone that it shouldn't." (D.E.)</li> <li>• "Then I would say another one of the barriers is language. So we're seeing a huge increase of people that English is not their primary, or sometimes even secondary language. We're a staff that predominantly just speaks English. " (A.T.)</li> <li>• "And that can be a huge barrier for people, especially for some of our customers who are coming from Latin America, where Spanish is actually the second language, and they speak the Indigenous language first, and their literacy rates in Spanish are really low and at like a second-grade level. But all of our forms are in Spanish for them, so that can also be a barrier." (A.T.)</li> </ul>
	Culinary Confidence	Limited food preparation knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "And we also find that things like food skills, culinary skills, are decreasing or they're not as strong for as many folks as they maybe once were. A lot of college students still know how to make ramen and a grilled cheese, but beyond that they're not feeling as confident in their cooking skills, which also impacts food security. So, again, food security is not just 'can I afford it?' which that's a big factor, but 'do I know how to use it? Is it something that I eat? That I know how to eat, that I know what to do with?' Like, yes, maybe they can buy meat in bulk at Costco, but have they ever touched red meat before and, you know, want to be able to do that? Or are they going to say, what's the easier, less culinarily scary option that maybe I can't afford as much of and then again you have food insecurity or lack of quality nutritious foods. And especially for college students food's really important to learning" (B.R.)</li> <li>• (Above quote continued) "I think that trickles over whether that's older adults having a similar yet alternate challenge of trying to navigate how do I cook for a smaller number of people as aging sometimes reduces the number of people in the home. And so you're going from cooking for a larger family to one or two and how do you buy for that? How do you make sure there's not food waste that is then money lost? And what does that mean? I've had folks come to class and say, 'Wow, I've never cut an apple because my wife did that' and now their wife has passed, and so they're trying to learn how to cook again." (B.R.)</li> <li>• "And those populations [food insecure families], it's still a time issue,</li> </ul>

			but to some extent, it's also that there is some knowledge there in terms of cooking skills, but it's also about confidence in knowing what they can do now with the resources that they have. Again, not a nutrition-specific knowledge issue, but more about culinary skills and culinary literacy." (B.R.)
	Seasonal Access	Local produce availability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Integration of our local food system. Local food continues to be the most inaccessible type of food in our community, even though it has so many benefits, whether it's nutritionally, economically, or environmentally. It is still exceedingly expensive and very inaccessible for a lot of people." (A.T.)</li> <li>• "Summertime, we have produce it is beautiful and lush and wonderful and then in the winter, it really does drop off. With that food drive season, there's two main times of year in which we operate food drives. The holiday season is our biggest one and for our non-perishable foods, we really need to make that last as long as possible until our next food drive season. We've actually tried to create a new food drive season in the spring to help offset, so that we can actually make our non-perishable items be stocked in the store all year round." (A.T.)</li> </ul>
	Information and Awareness	Many who qualify for food assistance don't know what's available or how to access it	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "It's a lack of people knowing that they have access to the food bank, even if they're brand new to town or they're not a resident of the state of Montana, or you know for any other reason they think they may be precluded from accessing services, the HRDC, so it's probably lack of knowledge. Yeah, that's far and away probably the biggest variable for people not accessing our resources" (D.E.)</li> <li>• "[Kinship caregivers] do qualify for additional resources, but they often don't know... But food is an interesting challenge because they don't know how to navigate. And then you have, on top of that, a lot of possibility for disordered eating because that's something that also comes along with when food insecurity gets to the point of hunger. Because not all hunger is, or not all food-insecure individuals are hungry per se. They might be getting enough calories, but they might not be getting enough nutrients. But when it gets to the point of hunger, especially within children, that can have lifelong impacts on their eating habits, whether they're doing things like hoarding or even just selective eating, that comes along with it. So then it's again a new caregiver trying to navigate food challenges while also trying to feed a child. And we have—Montana in general—some of the highest rates of kinship caregiving." (B.R.)</li> <li>• "But we're getting better at things like social media and we do share resources online. I'm working on a couple of online courses, actually, so that more folks can have access. But I would say recruitment and actually reaching the people that need these supports is sometimes the hardest." (B.R.)</li> </ul>
	Living Constraints	Available kitchen, shared housing, different food environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Customers might live in housing where they might not have a kitchen or they might share a kitchen with many people who might not share the same expectations about meal preparation and healthy eating." (S.G.)</li> <li>• "[Indigenous students] have a variety of intersecting challenges—often, not all, many are coming from a reservation community or even folks coming from Billings or other places around the state that maybe aren't in a reservation, they're coming from a different food environment that they haven't navigated in the same way. A lot of times their household</li> </ul>

			structure has changed. So they're coming from a household with multiple generations of family members, to Bozeman, where they're living on their own or living with roommates and that's a different way of living as well as like, "How do I access food? Where do I access food? What does that look like?" They may have more things available, but that doesn't mean that they know how to use them or that those are the things they're looking for." (B.R.)
	Conflicting Priorities	Nutrition often loses out to convenience, stress, or family tradeoffs (e.g. parents feeding children first)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "So I think of myself in a very small situation: what will my child eat at home? And am I going to buy things that she won't eat? Or am I going to buy the easy, pirate booty that she's really excited about because they have it at school? And sometimes it's the easy choice. And is that the most nutritious or would it be better for her to eat an apple? So that family component." (B.R.)</li> <li>• "And we find a lot of times with food insecure folks, they will prioritize their children getting food as opposed to the adults. So you can find a child not be hungry, but their parent might be." (B.R.)</li> <li>• "I think that when you're making decisions that you have to prioritize food or this other thing, it's sometimes easier to let food be the thing that's lower quality, that's lower access, that's lower in nutritional need. And I think that's one of the biggest challenges is when you have to prioritize food, unfortunately, it becomes the easy thing to let it go downhill." (B.R.)</li> <li>• "When organizations have to start prioritizing as well, maybe they're reaching more, but then somebody's excluded from that." (B.R.)</li> </ul>
Organizational and Community Adaptation	Partnerships within the Network	Collaboration across partners (churches, sheriffs, libraries, sports teams) strengthens local response and community ownership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "We are actively working with many of the town's nonprofits and even for-profit to create a better safety net for our workforce." (S.G.)</li> <li>• "I think that the most recent thing I saw that HRDC posted on their Instagram, so it's not technically an official collaboration, it was more of a collaboration with the community, is asking folks who had a significant harvest at the time, feel free to bring in their extra veggies and fruits and whatever else they pulled from the garden to the food bank" (D.E.)</li> <li>• "I would say a lot more it's the community organizations that will come to us and say I think there's a need for this type of class or something and then we [Extension] partner to provide that... So we do some direct programming through 4-H and youth development. But a lot of times we're working with organizations to say what do you need? How can we help you get the resources that this community is asking for? And sometimes that's us, sometimes it's connecting them to other things." (B.R.)</li> <li>• "We're [Extension] doing more work with policy systems environment as well. SNAP education had been doing a lot of work with that. So things like looking at how do we work with a food bank— how are you organizing and displaying your produce so that it is visible, accessible, and appealing to folks. What additional reason do you need a new freezer so that you can provide these foods? How can we help you get that? We do have that kind of direct education component. We're looking more at how do we make systemic changes with our partners to, again, just make it an easier choice because this population just doesn't have the time and ability or all the time they need. Like, again, most people know fruits and vegetables are going to be good for you, it's probably better to eat more home-cooked foods than french fries from the fast food restaurant... And so it's not a knowledge gap— it's all</li> </ul>

			<p>of the other resources and that makes it a hard challenge to solve.” (B.R.)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “These partnerships, these collaborations, especially in rural spaces, look different in every community, but they’re really unique in terms of how they bring in partners that you wouldn’t always think of as food partners. Whether that’s things as straightforward as housing connections to food, like in HRDC, they said, ‘Oh, yeah, we want to expand our services. We want to make sure that we are systematically addressing people’s needs,’ but I just actually wrote a paper looking at rural communities and how they navigated COVID and they brought in people like the libraries, bringing in the local sheriffs to be able to deliver food, or having people come and glean food from different neighborhoods.” (B.R.)</li> <li>• “Something like Open and Local here in Gallatin County really works to connect all of these different people that identify as food-related partners, but I would say even more so pulling in more of those connections like churches, that, again, it’s not their primary role, but they do have a vested interest and have a community that they’re accessing. . . Well when you take another step further, you see they have aligning missions or aligning audiences, and those can sometimes be the most powerful partnerships and we find that with Extension too” (B.R.)</li> <li>• “Sometimes we’re [Extension] connecting agencies to say, ‘This organization down the road is doing something entirely different, but they’re doing a coat drive that maybe connects to your pantry in some way,’ so helping to make those connections being that it’s necessary in communities like this to have folks because we’re all doing so many different roles. We’re a little bit of a jack-of-all-trades that we then have to say okay, how do we build capacity without increasing people? And that becomes partnering with organizations that you’re not doing the exact same thing when you’re partnering” (B.R.)</li> <li>• “There’s definitely that underlying current here that says we’ve got to help each other. And how do we do that in creative and unique ways? So even if it’s like seeing the local football team bagging groceries at the grocery store, asking for donations for whatever cause they might be supporting— those kinds of things sometimes have more traction in a space like this.” (B.R.)</li> <li>• “And you wouldn’t think the football team is the one that’s the supporting organization to reduce food insecurity, but again, they are able to capitalize on that community connection and to partner with unexpected organizations. It makes a big difference. And building on that local rivalry, I think that’s a fantastic example too of how it’s not enough to meet all of the need but...we’re going to come up with our own solution to address food insecurity because we see it’s an issue. And until we can get larger systemic changes in place to support more people, this is a small step that we can take. Just like behavior change, we know that small steps are what you need to make a big change. The same thing is true of food environments: when we can raise the awareness that these people might be your neighbors, it humanizes the challenge as well as says, ‘Is there more that we could be doing to help each other or to support our neighbors to have the food that we have?’” (B.R.)</li> <li>• “We also have a contract with Montana Language Services. So, for our staff and volunteers who speak no Spanish, English is the only language that they speak. We can call Montana Language Services and have a</li> </ul>
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			<p>translator immediately via phone or, through the computer.” (A.T.)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “It definitely takes a lot of community communication. We have deep partnerships with Bozeman Public Library and Bozeman Health and Community Health Partners, Salvation Army, Love Inc., Sacks Fifth Store, and the Bike Kitchen. So, we really try to bring in community partners to help us fill in the gaps.” (A.T.)</li> <li>• “The local churches, Love Inc., is a big leader in that as well as Salvation Army... and then all of our partners that try to get food to their clients or customers. We have a partnership with Haven, the Eating Disorders Center of Montana, other social work based organizations” (A.T.)</li> <li>• “We try to work really closely with the County as well. And so, like the County Health Department is doing an immunization clinic here tomorrow. Bozeman Health is going to be doing an immunization and free healthcare clinic, later in the month as well.” (A.T.)</li> <li>• “We have such strong partnerships with the Bike Kitchen, we can give out bike vouchers for people who lack transportation and they can receive a free bike once a year. Saks Thrift Store, we have a voucher program where every six months, we can give someone a clothing voucher for them and their dependents and then they can go shopping for new clothes. That's why we really try to leverage those partnerships.” (A.T.)</li> <li>• “Some of my classes focus on sustainability and food system; student work with local partners like the HRDC or on campus resources like Bounty of the Bridger to gain understanding of how food and security shows up here in our community. In my classes I also help promote our Campus Garden, who donates food produce to the pantry to community partners, and I've also been involved in projects through the USDA Higher Education Challenge Grant that really aims to bring the university and the community together to address food waste and food security.” (W.Z.)</li> <li>• “There are a lot of collaborations happening within our department and within our campus and MSU partners with HRDC. So some of the classes that I taught we partner with the local HRDC, we partner with the town's Harvest Garden. And the grant that I'm currently involved in, the USDA Higher Education Challenge grant, is really trying to work on food recovery as well as other sustainability directions like food security.” (W.Z.)</li> <li>• “And I also know that the extension service has a Growing Together Montana program that links community gardens and local pantries like the fork and spoon, to address food insecurity.” (W.Z.)</li> </ul>
	Education	Initiatives to educate both the community, individuals in need, and potential educators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “[Kinship caregivers] do qualify for additional resources, but they often don't know, and so one of our goals through Extension is to try to connect them with those resources and help them to understand you have this.” (B.R.)</li> <li>• “Extended Food and Nutrition Education Program, or FNEP. We still have FNEP, which is able to serve low-income families, providing nutrition education, things like how do you shop on a budget, how do you use the foods that you have access to through things like the food pantry, what do you do with the beans that you just got that you don't usually cook with. So we have nutrition education programs. They also have culinary skills, budget, shopping, food safety considerations, a whole lot—it's called nutrition education, but it has a whole lot more than just that. These are the foods that are good for your body. So I</li> </ul>

			<p>would say nutrition education is primarily our [MSU Extension's] biggest area of outreach. But in all of that, we try to tailor information to be accessible and impactful for lower income audiences." (B.R.)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "So even in programs like Dining with Diabetes, which helps folks who may not be regularly using their medical team for support in diabetes management. Also, another big challenge particularly impacting low-income individuals or demographics with higher health risk food insecurity becomes a comorbidity with diabetes. But helping them to navigate what does it mean to read a food label while also considering what of these options can I buy, how do I make these foods within my budget, etc. So we're kind of infusing that into all of our classes." (B.R.)</li> <li>• "People are growing more things and so they need to know, 'Okay, so I've grown this—what do I do with it? I've got so many green tomatoes. Now what?' And so that's where Extension comes in in the food realm. And I think we have some new opportunities. We're kind of a niche organization, but about the only one people would turn to for home food preservation questions" (B.R.)</li> </ul>
	Infrastructure/ Services Growth	Expansion of facilities and services designed to anticipate population growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "The new HRDC facility that's over on Griffin Drive is brand new as of two or three years ago and it's a big old \$30 or \$40 million facility. It was designed to be able to grow with the population of the county over the next 30 years. So it's a massive facility that, space-wise, is pretty well underutilized at the moment because we're not ["adware" (?)]. They think we're gonna be in 10 years or 15 years or 20 years as far as population. But they have prepared a facility for that, so I mean, this place is like the size of Costco. You have walk-in fridges and freezers that are four stories tall. You have to use a fork loader to get stuff off of it. So they're ready, and that's why they built this facility— 2030, 2040, 2050, with the projections of what Gallatin County is going to look like that the HRDC will at least be prepared with their facilities... So good on them for knowing that they were going to have to bend themselves over backwards to make this happen in the short term, in hopes that long term there'll be a lot of stability for the organization and for the Valley." (D.E.)</li> <li>• "The HRDC operates the only food banks in the County. However, churches have started to create soup kitchens. The Salvation Army does a lunch service for our homeless shelter. Love Ink is starting to, with their new homeless shelter, do a church and dinner service every Sunday. But we're all just really trying to scramble and meet that need, one at a time, when resources are just kind of being whittled down." (A.T.)</li> <li>• "So I would say they're [CBOs in the area] definitely working on adapting. They're trying to grow in terms of service, in terms of what they have accessible. Even in some of the smaller towns, we see food pantries being opened longer or expanding that service." (B.R.)</li> <li>• "And I think that even improving facilities or increasing access to housing, for example, is in conjunction with that, so they're looking at systemic issues when they can. But again, it's the capacity of those organizations to be able to meet the needs and unfortunately just don't have enough of those resources, whether it's time or food itself or whatnot, to be able to meet all of the need that really is here." (B.R.)</li> <li>• "Yeah, local programs definitely have evolved to keep up with the growth and the changes and the challenges, the new challenges arise. I think some examples could be the local HRDC and the Bounty of the Bridgers have both expanded. So they have added a mobile food</li> </ul>

			<p>distributions like self-serve pantries and even different pop up events to make food access easier.” (W.Z.)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “storage spaces - such as facility, equipment, volunteer shortage, and labor shortages to really keep enough fresh food on hand, have the difficulty to actually store fresh food. Bounty of the Bridger for example, has limited capacity. So most of the food items they offer is either shelf stable or has a limited amount of fresh produce on hand.” (W.Z.)</li> <li>• “Bounty of the Bridger has moved from a little bit outside of campus to the main location on campus in the in the recreation center and HRDC has moved to a location where it's allowing them to expand their services, having a larger commercial kitchens and et cetera.” (W.Z.)</li> </ul>
	Strategic Innovation	e.g., food preservation, bilingual adaptations, etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I really appreciate that they've [HRDC] done a very good job incorporating and welcoming in the Hispanic community in Gallatin County. We've seen a huge spike in that population over the past decade. And the food bank and the HRDC in general have done a really good job of presenting all of their information in well translated Spanish and being very considerate of cultural customs that might come along with somebody coming to the food bank from Central or South America.” (D.E.)</li> <li>• “It turns out a lot of people are canning, especially in Montana and especially in our very rural food insecure audiences. Now there's a lot of variation in terms of what are people doing and home food preservation means everything from canning to drying to freezing things... Trying to think about food preservation broadly, we also have some recent research that suggests about half of those who are preserving foods would be considered low income. And so we have programs like food prescription programs where people get increased access to fruits and vegetables through a doctor's note... There's a couple that are trying to start here in Gallatin County, but we find another challenge with that. So it's aimed at lower income folks with higher risk for nutrition-related chronic disease, but when they get, say, a CSA box with all of this produce, they're like, ‘Uh, what am I supposed to do with all this? I've never eaten this before. And now I've got a week's worth of it.’ And so that's where something like food preservation can come in. You've gotten access to a bulk quantity of this—what do you do with it? In addition to how do you cook it, how do you dry it in new ways, but also how do you keep it so it is something that you can use over time.” (B.R.)</li> <li>• “We actually had a program that provided high school students with Instapots...because they would go into—this was on one of the reservations that this program started—into living situations where they didn't have a stove” (B.R.)</li> <li>• “Literally, do you have a microwave? What can you cook in a microwave? But then some of these culinary tools, we have innovations that you sauté things or you can make rice in that or make a stew. But again, you have to feel comfortable using that and know that you could and have that resource available to you” (B.R.)</li> </ul>
Resource Constraints and Systemic Interdependence	Staff and Volunteer Capacity	Reliance on volunteers and limited staffing strains	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I think they [HRDC] do a very good job for what they have as far as staffing and like a full-time paid staff as you would imagine a non-profit that runs a food bank and a warming center, you know, it's a pretty stressful and unrewarding job from the outside looking in. It's a thankless job, I guess, is a good way to look at it. And so I think a lot of</li> </ul>

		continuity and communication, and employee burnout	<p>folks burn out pretty quickly, so they're constantly trying to balance the... Well, it's like kitchen work in a way. So you're constantly trying to balance, like, you just trained somebody and now they're leaving and now you're going to train somebody again and try not to sound jaded while you're doing it." (D.E.)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "I think, for example, if there's only one person in that role, they're going to be overwhelmed because they're covering Livingston, Bozeman, the entire, yeah, it's a lot of county. And if you're just one person, there's only so much you can do without someone helping out. So I bet you there are probably a couple spots within the HRDC where they'd love to have a second or third person helping out in that role. And as I'm sure we all understand, there just aren't folks to do it outside of volunteer roles. And if you're relying on volunteer help in those regards, you're probably going to have gaps: gaps in schedules, but also gaps in passion and completing the task as somebody who might be paid to do so to accomplish." (D.E.)</li> </ul>
	Funding	Federal, state, and local funding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "I work at the check-in counter at the food bank run by the Human Resources Development Council of Gallatin County (HRDC). I help check folks into our system, which is both county-accessible and also federally accessible by the U.S. government, and formerly by the USDA. I'm not sure what kind of funding or supplies we still receive from them, given the current state of the federal government previous to the shutdown. I think there was some defunding." (D.E.)</li> <li>• "They have a lot of pressures from the federal government, even before Donald came back into office in February. There's a lot of paperwork. There's a lot of official documentation that has to go along with this whole thing, which is why they have the check-in, which is why everybody has to sign in, so that they can show, to state government, county government, city government, and the federal government, that the funding they are receiving or the resources they are receiving are properly being allocated to the community. And that's got to be pretty frustrating. It sounds very bureaucratic." (D.E.)</li> <li>• "Unfortunately, I will say funding is changing what we can offer. Some of the biggest programs that we've had related to food insecurity specifically were SNAP education and the Extended Food and Nutrition Education Program, or FNEP. We still have FNEP." (B.R.)</li> <li>• "Unfortunately, Gallatin County does not have a nutrition educator or a family consumer sciences educator that can provide this education directly because we have so many other community organizations that might fill those roles that our county commissioners have not provided funding for those positions in the past. So a lot of times I'm the one that will go out in the community. Like if HRDC wants an educational nutrition class, they might call me [MSU Extension agent] up and say, 'Hey, can you come do a cooking class?' (B.R.)</li> <li>• "And now, in the last year or so, there's been a reduction in resources available to those food assistance programs—like taking away some of the local produce that they might have had access to through federal programs. And so then they're trying to expand, but they're decreasing what they're able to offer. And it's still not meeting the needs, I would say, of the population that could benefit." (B.R.)</li> </ul>
	Population Growth		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Yeah, we are the sole provider of food assistance, as far as I am aware, for the entirety of Gallatin County...that means we get folks coming from Livingston, we have folks here in Bozeman. Yeah, you have folks</li> </ul>

			<p>all along up I-90 and into the valley, north and south that rely on HRDC, Gallatin County Food Bank for food security, food access.” (D.E.)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I think population increase puts a strain on resources. And as we can see, it puts a strain on housing resources. Hence, some people have lots of money and some people don't. And that has created bigger challenges.” (B.R.)</li> <li>• “In terms of food assistance, I would say the biggest change is the limited amount of change. We have definitely increased, I would say, things like—I think you've talked to HRDC and some of those programs, yes, they've been able to make, they've been able to grow in their service, even Fork and Spoon with HRDC is seeing booming rises in the number of people using those resources. So we do have some resources in terms of food assistance, and they are growing. Are they growing enough to meet the growing needs? Less so” (B.R.)</li> <li>• “Bounty of the Bridgers here. I think I heard—and I don't know if you want to quote me on this—but they used to be able to provide food to faculty too, but they've decreased who they can serve so that they can serve better the students. Because there is such a growing need.” (B.R.)</li> </ul>
	Interconnected Issues	Housing, education, and food access are deeply intertwined	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Food is interrelated to so many things. You can't just help one person with a food challenge that they might have. It's a systemic issue. It's got a lot of moving parts whether it's the people in the household or in living space that might be influencing what you can or can't eat or how that food situation is navigated, how you make decisions about food, or larger community factors—what's available, what's accessible...” (B.R.)</li> <li>• “Interviewer: In your opinion, what is the most significant barrier preventing people in the community from accessing food? B.R.: I think it is NOT knowledge... First, what is it? It's NOT that. Because, again, most people have a basic understanding. Everybody eats, everybody talks about food. But I do think that it's larger system issues. I like to look at the social ecological model of what's influencing people's decisions and I would say sometimes it's specific systemic challenges, sometimes it's cost, sometimes it is comfort with those food products. But more so, it's things like the people around you.” (B.R.)</li> <li>• “I think really taking that systemic lens of understanding what's happening, how it's happening, how we can help people to improve and make the healthy choice the easy choice. Because most people know fruit and vegetables are good for them, but we know that most Americans are not eating anywhere close to the recommended amounts of fruits and vegetables, for example, and that's for a whole variety of reasons. What are those things that we can make a difference in, and what are the low-hanging fruit, if you will, or maybe the folks that are in most need of some sort of systemic change that can support them in that” (B.R.)</li> <li>• “So what can they afford in terms of the quality of food? Whether it's how long does it take them to get across town, is their job allowing them to have time to be home at a meal preparation time to have food as a family...but that's a really hard thing to do when...you're struggling and have to live outside of town because the cost of living is too high here. So cost of other things besides just food become a factor that contributes. Where are you going to prioritize that?” (B.R.)</li> <li>• “And I think that's one of the biggest barriers to improving food access is it's different for everybody. So each person has different factors that</li> </ul>

			<p>are contributing to why they're making the choices that they're making. And so you can't just say, well, if we fix this, it would solve the whole problem because that's not how people work, especially when it comes to food. Everybody eats, and everybody has a connection to that food and that's a great thing as well as very challenging...It is the biggest barrier, I would say, just the variation of so many challenges coming together.” (B.R.)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I think if anything research has shown me just how complex food insecurity is. It's a big issue that we need to keep trying to address, but it can't be the same for every community and it's not something that's going to be easily solved. Probably similar to housing challenges. There's a lot of interconnected factors within this, that if you move one lever, another shifts, and does it go in the direction that you want it to, or have you just made a new challenge? And I think that's also the risk that you run. Are you taking away resources from one thing to support another? What comes first? Do we need to have people fed? Do we need to have people housed? Do we need to have people educated? All of those things would be great to let everybody have access to, but it's not the system that we live in, unfortunately.” (B.R.)</li> <li>• “You can't control how much you're going to pay for rent, you can't control how much you're going to pay towards your car payment, health insurance, any other bills, it all aligns with fixed, but food is the one elastic cost - you can spend more money on food, you can less spend more money on food. And so that's where the food insecurity piece comes in. It's not actually about the food, it's about all the other factors weighing in. Which is why it's not just a Silver Bullet solution” (A.T.)</li> </ul>
Stigma and Social Perceptions		Stigma operates as a social barrier that keeps people from seeking help	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I also think that more of a social barrier is that people in Montana have a lot of pride, and it can be really hard to ask for help. There's a lot of shame that can come along with that, so breaking down those barriers can be pretty challenging - it's okay to ask for help and actually there's a lot of dignity and agency that you can get by realizing that you can ask for help and there are resources available to you in that community. (A.T.)</li> <li>• “And in Montana, there's still a big challenge with stigma of accessing food assistance, which that has not gone away, and in some cases has increased, depending on the population.” (B.R.)</li> <li>• “I'd say the biggest gap is just capacity to be able to serve the folks and capacity to reduce stigma so that the folks that need the food assistance actually access it. Because people accessing food assistance support us all, as those folks are healthier—they're missing fewer days of work because they're not sick, they're contributing more to the tax base, whatever it might be. They're more productive citizens when they can have food-secure environments. So it benefits us all to have more people be food-secure. And I think that just general capacity to meet that need and to connect with those individuals is probably the biggest challenge.” (B.R.)</li> <li>• “I would say in terms of the amount of need, we know that food insecurity across the country has increased...And I don't know that our measurement of food insecurity across the country is excluding people above that gap. Especially in our valley, that, again, are struggling to access that quality food.” (B.R.)</li> </ul>

### **Appendix C: Summary of Key Themes**

#### **Theme 1: Diversity of Food Insecurity Experiences**

##### *Summary:*

Gallatin County serves a variety of individuals and demographics through its food assistance programs. When discussing the primary population served, interviewees shared the following characteristics: college/college-aged students, older adults (65+), working people, families, non-English-speaking and international individuals, as well as the unhoused and low-income community. Many participants emphasized that there is a variety of individuals served, not bound by one quality, and that they have witnessed a steady increase, particularly starting around the time of COVID.

##### *Interpretation:*

Local food assistance programs serve a diverse set of populations that do not fit one demographic model. Responses reveal that at-risk populations include those with vulnerable qualities, including language barriers, eligibility, age, and responsibilities.

##### *Representative Quotes:*

(B.R.): “I would say the demographics are varied. There's a lot of different demographics of folks that are seeking food assistance.”

(A.T.): “Anyone who is in need of food, self-identifying as that, can come and access our services. We serve the entire community.”

(W.Z.): “I think students especially rely on campus pantries when money gets tight.”

(B.R.): “We see a lot of older folks. They need support and food assistance...”

(S.G.): “We did see another demographic shift during Covid as the number of families with children and older senior citizens found themselves in uncertain financial situations.”

(D.E.): “The two most prominent demographics I see at a superficial level are families and members of the homeless community.”

(A.T.): “We've seen a vast increase in our LEP, so limited English proficiency, and Hispanic population.”

(W.Z.): “ Perhaps the only change I've seen is because of political and visa restrictions. We're seeing fewer and fewer international students on campus, which is also a group of students that experience high food insecurity.”

(B.R.): “I would say that some big groups, having recently been to somewhere like HRDC, have a lot of unhoused folks or folks with unstable housing.”

## **Theme 2: Systematic Barriers and the Impact of Conflicting Priorities**

### *Summary:*

Interviewees expressed a wide range of barriers impacting individuals' food security. These barriers are summarized by systematic inhibitors and prioritization. These barriers included high cost of living, restrictive living conditions, transportation, time constraints and conflicting priorities, language, culinary confidence, seasonal access, and general knowledge of services and how to access them. These barriers are further emphasized by the indication that the cost of living is stressed by other priority expenses such as rent, utilities, or children, which depletes funds, leaving food as the first cost to go. Transportation was also heavily weighted, as food assistance programs can become challenging to access in the winter seasons when road conditions are poor and weather conditions are extreme.

### *Interpretation:*

There are many presentable barriers keeping individuals from accessing reliable food for both themselves and their families. Bozeman's cost of living, reliable transportation, and



language accommodations present external challenges, while personal inhibitors include time availability to access food banks or prepare nutritious meals, as well as general awareness of programming.

*Representative Quotes:*

(W.Z.): the biggest barrier is the cost of living. Rent is really high. Groceries bills and utility bills, those are all just going up so fast that a lot of people can't keep up with those, let alone have leftover money to actually access and purchase healthy food options or maybe even food options in general.”

(A.T.): “Transportation is a big one. We do have our streamline bus service that comes here a couple times a day, but those times aren’t always convenient for people.”

(B.R.): “That they can have the time—and time being a big factor—whether it's how long it takes them to get across town, is their job allowing them to have time to be home at a meal preparation time to have food as a family.”

(W.Z.): “People living outside of Bozeman, or working long hours, they often struggle to reach the pantry because of the limitation on transportations or their working condition.”

(A.T.): “Then I would say another one of the barriers is language. So we're seeing a huge increase of people that English is not their primary, or sometimes even secondary language. We're a staff that predominantly just speaks English.”

(B.R.): “And we also find that things like food skills, culinary skills, are decreasing or they're not as strong for as many folks as they maybe once were.”

(A.T.): “Integration of our local food system. Local food continues to be the most inaccessible type of food in our community, even though it has so many benefits, whether it's nutritionally, economically, or environmentally. It is still exceedingly expensive and very inaccessible for a lot of people.”

(D.E.): “It's a lack of people knowing that they have access to the food bank, even if they're brand new to town or they're not a resident of the state of Montana, or you know for any other reason they think they may be precluded from accessing services, the HRDC, so it's probably lack of knowledge.”

### **Theme 3: Organizational and Community Adaptations**

#### *Summary:*

In response to these common barriers to food access, the community and food assistance programs have made strides to expand and collaborate. Some commonalities in interviewees' responses to closing this disparity are through means of partnerships, education, infrastructure and service growth, and innovative adaptations. Most frequently referenced by the respondents were local partnerships. These partnerships varied drastically, with some including direct food assistance, and others providing additional services (bikes, transportation services, classes, etc.).

#### *Interpretation:*

While barriers prevent individuals and families from accessing nutritious and consistent food resources, community organizations have banded together to help address the issue more holistically. These efforts take note of a more systematic approach, that the issue is not so much that there is not enough food, but rather a broken system that prevents people from accessing it.

Collaboration across unlikely partners (churches, sheriffs, libraries, sports teams) strengthens local response and community ownership.

*Representative Quotes:*

(S.G.): “We are actively working with many of the town’s nonprofits and even for-profit to create a better safety net for our workforce.”

(B.R.): “These partnerships, these collaborations, especially in rural spaces, look different in every community, but they're really unique in terms of how they bring in partners that you wouldn't always think of as food partners.”

(A.T.): “It definitely takes a lot of community communication. We have deep partnerships with Bozeman Public Library and Bozeman Health and Community Health Partners, Salvation Army, Love Inc., Sacks Fifth Store, and the Bike Kitchen.”

(B.R.): “So we have nutrition education programs. They also have culinary skills, budget, shopping, food safety considerations, a whole lot—it's called nutrition education, but it has a whole lot more than just that.”

(W.Z.): “Yeah, local programs definitely have evolved to keep up with the growth and the changes and the challenges, then new challenges arise. I think some examples could be the local HRDC and the Bounty of the Bridgers have both expanded. So they have added mobile food distributions like self-serve pantries and even different pop up events to make food access easier.”

(B.R.): “It turns out a lot of people are canning, especially in Montana and especially in our very rural food insecure audiences. Now there's a lot of variation in terms of what are people doing and home food preservation means everything from canning to drying to freezing things.”

(B.R.) “Something like Open and Local here in Gallatin County really works to connect all of these different people that identify as food-related partners, but I would say even more so pulling in more of those connections like churches, that, again, it's not their primary role, but they do have a vested interest and have a community that they're accessing... Well when you take another step further, you see they have aligning missions or aligning audiences, and those can sometimes be the most powerful partnerships.”

#### **Theme 4: Resource Constraints and Systemic Interdependence**

##### *Summary:*

The food insecurity landscape is shaped by capacity, funding, and population pressures. Local food assistance programs work to adapt and make efforts to expand in order to serve a larger capacity, although resource constraints have presented an increasing challenge. Reliance on volunteers and limited staffing strain continuity and communication; federal and county-level funding gaps force difficult prioritization decisions; and as Gallatin County expands, programs can't scale fast enough, leading to exclusion of some groups. Interviewees consistently referenced interconnected issues, such as housing and education, acknowledging that food security is a systemic issue with not one singular solution.

##### *Interpretation:*

It is evident that the issue of food security is larger than just access to food. Housing, education, and food access are deeply intertwined and, given resource constraints, lead to difficult decisions about what/who to support, which can inevitably lead to redistribution of resources that excludes certain groups from getting the support they need. To solve the issue itself, there needs to be a system that supports the deeper causes of food insecurity. Examples of

this are more affordable housing, health insurance, etc. and through the interviewees responses it is apparent that the issue is systemic and therefore challenging to resolve.

*Representative Quotes:*

(B.R.): “Food is interrelated to so many things. You can't just help one person with a food challenge that they might have. It's a systemic issue.”

(A.T.): “You can't control how much you're going to pay for rent, you can't control how much you're going to pay towards your car payment, health insurance, any other bills, it all aligns with fixed, but food is the one elastic cost - you can spend more money on food, you can less spend more money on food. And so that's where the food insecurity piece comes in. It's not actually about the food, it's about all the other factors weighing in. Which is why it's not just a Silver Bullet solution.”

(D.E.): “And as I'm sure we all understand, there just aren't folks to do it outside of volunteer roles. And if you're relying on volunteer help in those regards, you're probably going to have gaps: gaps in schedules, but also gaps in passion and completing the task as somebody who might be paid to do so to accomplish.”

(D.E.): “They have a lot of pressure from the federal government, even before Donald came back into office in February. There's a lot of paperwork. There's a lot of official documentation that has to go along with this whole thing, which is why they have the check-in, which is why everybody has to sign in, so that they can show, to state government, county government, city government, and the federal government, that the funding they are receiving or the resources they are receiving are properly being allocated to the community. And that's got to be pretty frustrating. It sounds very bureaucratic.”

(B.R.): “I think population increase puts a strain on resources. And as we can see, it puts a strain on housing resources. Hence, some people have lots of money and some people don't. And that has created bigger challenges.”

### **Theme 5: External and Internal Social Perceptions and Stigmas**

#### *Summary:*

Stigma operates as a social barrier that keeps people from seeking help. Stigma comes in many forms, both personal perception of needing assistance and interpretation of external perceptions. Interviewees see participants and nonparticipants of food assistance programs to be prideful and have a sense of ego, or shame, that may keep them from seeking help. The recommended solution to this is to educate individuals and the community on the necessity of these programs to hopefully close the gap of those needing assistance and choosing not to receive it.

#### *Interpretation:*

Stigma operates as a social barrier that keeps people from seeking the help they need due to their perceptions regarding support services. Beyond economic and logistical barriers, social stigma remains one of the most pervasive obstacles to equitable food access. Agencies acknowledge that addressing stigma requires more than expanding services; it requires changing narratives about who experiences food insecurity.

#### *Representative Quotes:*

(A.T.): “I also think that more of a social barrier is that people in Montana have a lot of pride, and it can be really hard to ask for help. There's a lot of shame that can come along with that, so breaking down those barriers can be pretty challenging - it's okay to ask for help and actually

there's a lot of dignity and agency that you can get by realizing that you can ask for help and there are resources available to you in that community.”

(B.R.): “And in Montana, there's still a big challenge with the stigma of accessing food assistance, which has not gone away, and in some cases has increased, depending on the population.”

(B.R.): “I'd say the biggest gap is just capacity to be able to serve the folks and capacity to reduce stigma so that the folks that need the food assistance actually access it.”