

# Food System Committee Sector Report

## May 2026

### *Food Access*

#### **Food Bank Utilization**

Whatcom County food banks distributed 13,225,058 pounds of food in 2025 and recorded 352,129 client visits, up modestly from 349,243 in 2024. The rates of increase in both visits and poundage have slowed substantially compared to the steep growth seen between 2019 and 2023, but demand has not declined.

First quarter 2026 data from the food bank network shows variation in trends by location. Bellingham Food Bank (+7.0%), the Salvation Army Bellingham location (+8.8%), Foothills Food Bank serving East Whatcom County (+5.3%), and the Blaine Food Bank (+6.0%) all recorded increases relative to 2025 quarterly averages. Ferndale (-2.0%), Project Hope in Lynden (-3.2%), and Nooksack Valley (-7.5%) saw decreases. It should be noted that the decrease in Everson/Nooksack may not indicate reduced need—it is likely the result of federal immigration enforcement actions creating a chilling effect on food bank access.

Even where food remained physically available, affordability appears to have significantly reduced functional food access between 2024 and 2025. Rising grocery prices, stagnant income and benefit thresholds, and disruptions to SNAP assistance meant that many households within geographic reach of food outlets could no longer consistently afford sufficient or nutritious food. Economic barriers can limit access just as significantly as physical distance.

#### **Federal Program Reductions**

Multiple federal nutrition programs that Whatcom County residents depend on have been cut or face significant proposed reductions.

- **SNAP:** Approximately 11% of Whatcom County residents rely on SNAP benefits. During the fall 2025 federal government shutdown, SNAP recipients in Whatcom County experienced delayed and partial benefits for the first time in the program's history. Federal changes to SNAP under H.R. 1 (signed July 2025) introduce stricter work requirements, expanded eligibility reviews, and reduced federal cost-sharing with states. These changes are projected to significantly increase food insecurity in Washington in the next one to three years.
- **TEFAP and LFPA:** Federal cuts to the Emergency Food Assistance Program and the Local Food Purchase Assistance program in spring 2025 resulted in an estimated annual loss of \$850,000 in food for hunger relief organizations across Whatcom County.

- **WIC and SFMNP:** WIC participation in Whatcom County grew from 4,979 participants in FFY2024 to 5,152 in FFY2025, a 3.5% increase, with food dollars redeemed rising from approximately \$2.42 million to \$2.69 million. This growth reflects rising reliance on the program. Conditions have worsened significantly in 2026. State estimates indicate that only approximately 7% of eligible Washington households will receive WIC or SFMNP benefits this year, down from roughly 30-40% in prior years, due to federal funding cuts. New applicants may not receive benefit cards at all, as distribution is being prioritized for existing participants.

Program access remains a barrier in East Whatcom County, where there are no WIC or SFMNP-approved retailers east of Nugents Corner Market. Expanding the number of approved retail locations in underserved areas of the county remains a priority need.

## Outlook

Current food bank utilization trends suggest that acute demand has stabilized—for now. However, the combination of ongoing SNAP changes, WIC funding uncertainty, rising food costs driven by fuel and fertilizer pressures, and the loss of emergency-era federal support points to meaningfully higher need in the next one to three years. Whatcom County residents who rely on food assistance face growing barriers at exactly the time when the organizations serving them are absorbing major resource reductions.

## Recommendations to the County Council

The following recommendations correspond to priority actions in the Whatcom County Food System Plan (2023) and are offered in light of current conditions.

1. **Continue funding the Whatcom County Food Bank Network (Action 4.3.1).** Food banks distributed a record volume of food in 2025 and face significant anticipated increases in demand concurrent with federal resource cuts. County investment in food bank capacity directly addresses the gap between rising need and shrinking federal support.
2. **Expand and stabilize SNAP-accepting venues and nutrition incentive programs, and support WIC and SFMNP retailer expansion in underserved areas (Actions 4.3.2, 4.3.3).** With SNAP benefits at risk, ensuring that farmers markets and food outlets that accept SNAP and nutrition incentive programs (e.g. Market Match) are consistently funded becomes more important. The county should prioritize this as a buffer against anticipated federal reductions. In East Whatcom County, where no WIC or SFMNP-approved retailers currently operate east of Nugents Corner Market, the county should also support efforts to expand the number of approved retail locations, consistent with Action 4.3.3's direction to work with WIC to expand services in the foothills region.
3. **Assess food bank infrastructure capacity in anticipation of rising demand (Action 4.1.6).** The Food System Committee recommends that the county work with the Whatcom County Food Bank Network to conduct a forward-looking assessment of

staffing, facility, and funding capacity, with the goal of identifying gaps before they become crises.