

Memo

To: Executive Sidhu, County Executive
From: Mike Cohen, Executive Director--on behalf of Whatcom Food Bank Network
Re: ARPA Request for Food Security
Date: July 24, 2022

A request was put forward to County Council to authorize \$500,000 of the County's ARPA award for Whatcom County food banks to use for food purchases. This represents a small portion of the County's overall award and comes at a time when food bank demand has never been higher and is on a steep incline. This memo attempts to answer some of the questions that have been raised since the initial request and to frame the conversation that will occur on July 27, 2022.

Food Insecurity is Growing

Soon after the onset of COVID-19, food insecurity across the nation, state, and county grew dramatically. Throughout the pandemic news stories showed long food lines across the country as people lost work, supply chains were compromised, food and essential supply hoarding occurred, and the nation and state moved through a variety of public health advisories encouraging people to stay at home. Food banks in Whatcom County were forced to alter their practice of distributing food, but did not close during the pandemic, exemplifying the concept of essential workers. The University of Washington/Washington State University food security surveys and accompanying [briefs](#) showed two critical trends—food insecurity grew dramatically during the pandemic and grew disproportionately for people of color. Pandemic benefits such as pandemic EBT and the child tax credit provided some welcome relief for families and food bank visits. However, that relief was short lived.

Whatcom County Food Bank Visits

Whatcom County food banks had a similar experience to many food banks across the state. An already busy network of food banks saw visits grow. It is important to know that most of the food banks in Whatcom County are lean and efficient. Most have less than one paid full time equivalent employee, rely on volunteers and donated food, and receive little governmental support relative to other basic needs providers. Additionally, most of the food banks in the network are rural, making it more expensive for them to access food and more expensive for food bank families to access due to the costs associated with getting to the food banks.

The table below illustrates steady increases before and during the pandemic. In state fiscal year 2022 we experienced massive growth in visits due to the end of pandemic benefits, a struggling economy and massive inflation that is impacting us all.

Annual Food Bank Visits

2018	350,805
2019	377,260
2020	389,237
2021	399,461
2022	469,422

Current Needs

The increase in visits come at a time when many of the food bank network's sources of free food are flat or decreasing. All food banks report that Food Lifeline and Northwest Harvest, two

statewide food distributors, are struggling to provide the volume and variety of food they were pre-pandemic. The current state and forecast for the USDA commodity food program is pitiful. The 2023 commodity food program will bring 1/3 the food it brought to Whatcom County in 2021. The only way to make up for the increased demand and reduction in free food is for the network to increase its food purchasing.

A recent survey of food banks found that each food bank could spend between \$8,000 and \$15,000 a month on food if they had the funding. Bellingham Food Bank, the largest in the county, is spending in excess of \$300,000 a month on food. The food banks purchase food from a variety of Washington based wholesalers and food banks buy a diverse mix of perishable and non perishable foods. All food banks report needed assistance buying foods a basic and critical as milk, eggs, frozen protein, assorted dairy items, fresh and canned fruits and vegetables, and baby food. It's important to know that each food bank's specific needs are as diverse as the communities they serve. Additionally, the free food that is available from the sources discussed above change each week and month so the food that needs to be purchased is also always changing. We may not know exactly what we would purchase with a \$500,000 ARPA allocation, but we do know the food we would purchase is critically needed by the thousands of community members that visit us each day we are open.

Whatcom County food banks never turn people away. But, when we cannot purchase even the basics we would like, families leave with many critical items missing from their food bank shopping experience. Below are some quotes of how food banks manage demand that outpace our food inventory.

What happens if we don't have enough? We won't turn anyone away but the choices they currently have won't be there, we might have to return to limits, some items might not be available every week (eggs).--Everson Nooksack Valley Food Bank

We run out of items pretty regularly. I try to spread out high-demand, limited quantity products throughout a distribution so there's "good stuff" regardless of when a guest can make it in to shop. We also have to limit quantities of how much a household can take, and conversations surrounding why we can't offer more of a particular item that a family could really use, yet has limited access to, are always difficult. There are a lot of gaps in our shelving that didn't exist 8 months ago, and we didn't have to limit what we distributed. –Foothills Food Bank

If prices continue to increase and we can anticipate demand rising as well, we will need to begin cutting our families distributions by 25%. We will never turn folks away, but will need to reduce the amount each receives.—Ferndale Food Bank

The food bank network has a history of working well together. If the county agrees to allocate \$500,000 for food purchases we are confident we can reach consensus, like we have with every other county-wide grant award, on how to allocate the funds. We are more than happy to have any county staff present for those discussions when they happen.

Thank you for your consideration. We look forward to talking with you on Wednesday.