

Food Insecurity in Montgomery County

About the Fellow

Zach Benzaoui is pursuing a master's degree in public policy at the George Washington University. He is interested in researching and evaluating public policy at all levels of government and ensuring that government is responsive to the needs of its constituents. He has completed a prior internship at the Brookings Institution, where he supported research on tax policy and politics in the United States. He also completed an analyst internship at the Government Accountability Office.



Acknowledgements

Thank you to the Montgomery County Council for offering this fellowship program. Thank you to all of the kind and knowledgeable Council staff who oversaw the fellows program, particularly Logan Anbinder, Pam Dunn, Naeem Mia, and Nicole Rodríguez-Hernández, who dedicated their time to ensuring our success. Finally, thank you to everyone in the Office of Food Systems Resilience for welcoming me onto their team for an insightful and productive summer.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Current Policy Conditions	6
What is Montgomery County currently doing to address food insecurity?	9
What can the County Council do to improve food security?	10
Racial Equity and Social Justice Impact Statement	19
Conclusion	19

Introduction

Hunger and food insecurity are significant issues that affect Montgomery County. The Capital Area Food Bank estimated that 34% of adults in Montgomery County were food insecure in 2024, up from 27% in 2023.¹ Other measures of economic security, such as the University of Washington (UW) Self-Sufficiency Standard or the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) standard can be used to capture sufficiency of income for households to afford basic goods and services. In 2021, Montgomery County estimated that 45% of children in the County lived in households with incomes that fell below the UW Self Sufficiency Standard.

It is important to note the differences in definitions between food insecurity and hunger. Food insecurity is a “household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food”.² Food security relates to two key factors: purchasing power of an individual and accessibility of food (i.e. does someone have money to purchase food and do they have physical access to a distributor to receive food) – someone may live near a grocery store but they may lack income to purchase food (and vice versa). Hunger is an “individual-level physiological condition that may result from food insecurity”.³ Addressing food insecurity is not a guaranteed means of addressing hunger, but it is a very important method of addressing hunger.

¹ Capital Area Food Bank, “2024 Hunger Report,” 2024, <https://hunger-report.capitalareafoodbank.org/report-2024/>

Capital Area Food Bank Hunger Report, “2023 Hunger Report,” 2023, <https://hunger-report.capitalareafoodbank.org/report-2023/>

² USDA, “USDA Food Security in the U.S. - Definitions of Food Security,” <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/definitions-of-food-security>

³ USDA, “USDA Food Security in the U.S. - Definitions of Food Security,” <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/definitions-of-food-security>

Current Assessments of Need – 2022 Childhood Hunger Assessment

The Montgomery County Food Council administered a survey to assess the food security needs of the County. Key information is summarized below:

Survey Demographics

- Only parents and caregivers of children in households were surveyed
- 1300 respondents; 84% responded in English, 16% in Spanish
- 46% White; 21% Latino; 14% Black; 7% American Indian or Alaska Native; 5% Asian; 3% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander; 2% African; 1% multiracial
- 94% reported household income below \$80,000
 - 12% of households reported incomes below \$10,000
 - 35% of households reported incomes between \$20,000 and \$40,000
 - 31% of households reported incomes between \$40,000 and \$60,000
 - 16% of households reported incomes between \$60,000 and \$80,000
- Average household size of 4.5
- 76% of households spoke English as the primary language
- 16% of households spoke Spanish or Spanish Creole as the primary language

It is worth discussing that the demographics from this survey are not representative of the Montgomery County population. Below is some comparison data for the population of Montgomery County, taken from various sources:

- 39% White; 21% Latino; 19% Black; 15% Asian and Pacific Islander⁴

⁴ Montgomery County Planning, “Demographics,” accessed July 2025, <https://montgomeryplanning.org/tools/research/demographics/>

- 23.8% of households report incomes between \$15,000 and \$75,000⁵
- 60% of households report incomes above \$100,000 (median income of \$158,000)⁶
- Average household size of 2.7⁷
- 57% of households speak English as their primary language at home⁸
- 18% of households speak Spanish as their primary language at home⁹

Food Insecurity Outcomes

- 89% of households reported a moderate or high level of food insecurity
- Spanish-speaking households were significantly more likely than English-speaking households to report food insecurity
- Food secure households are more likely to get their food from grocery stores (69%) than food insecure households (50%)
- Food insecure households are more likely to use food banks, pantries, or community distribution sites (43%) than food secure households (19%)

⁵ U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce, "Income in the Past 12 Months (in 2023 Inflation-Adjusted Dollars)," *American Community Survey, ACS 1-Year Estimates Subject Tables, Table S1901*, accessed July 30, 2025, [https://data.census.gov/table/ACSST1Y2023.S1901?q=montgomery+county&t=Income+\(Households,+Families,+Individuals\)](https://data.census.gov/table/ACSST1Y2023.S1901?q=montgomery+county&t=Income+(Households,+Families,+Individuals)).

⁶ U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce, "Income in the Past 12 Months (in 2023 Inflation-Adjusted Dollars)," *American Community Survey, ACS 1-Year Estimates Subject Tables, Table S1901*, accessed July 30, 2025, [https://data.census.gov/table/ACSST1Y2023.S1901?q=montgomery+county&t=Income+\(Households,+Families,+Individuals\)](https://data.census.gov/table/ACSST1Y2023.S1901?q=montgomery+county&t=Income+(Households,+Families,+Individuals)).

⁷ Maryland State Department of Education, "Montgomery County Child Care Demographics," 2023 https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/HHS-Program/Resources/Files/CYF%20Docs/MCCCRRC/2023_Demographics%20MoCo.pdf, p. 3

⁸ U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce, "Language Spoken at Home," *American Community Survey, ACS 1-Year Estimates Subject Tables, Table S1601*, accessed on August 11, 2025, <https://data.census.gov/table/ACSST1Y2023.S1601?q=Montgomery+County,+Maryland&t=Language+Spoken+at+Home>.

⁹ U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce, "Language Spoken at Home," *American Community Survey, ACS 1-Year Estimates Subject Tables, Table S1601*, accessed on August 11, 2025, <https://data.census.gov/table/ACSST1Y2023.S1601?q=Montgomery+County,+Maryland&t=Language+Spoken+at+Home>.

- 70% of food secure households drive to get food while food insecure households drive, walk, bike, and take public transit at roughly equal rates (about 20% for each mode of transport)

Barriers to Food Security

- 48% of food insecure households identified inadequate income as an obstacle to getting enough food for their family
- 25% of food insecure households identified difficulty acquiring the types of foods they want or need as an obstacle to getting enough food for their family
- 24% of food insecure households said lack of knowledge in finding food assistance was an obstacle to getting enough food for their family
- Food insecure households identified many other obstacles, including stigma around receiving food assistance; difficulty getting food for young children (such as baby food/formula); inadequacy of transportation (public and private); and fear of providing personal information to the government

When asked to select the top two resources that would make it easier to access food, food insecure households identified the following:

- 36% said increased benefit levels of food assistance (like SNAP or WIC)
- 35% said more accessible food assistance
- 29% said gift cards to buy groceries
- Between 15% and 20% of households chose each of the following:
 - Gift cards to buy prepared meals
 - Self-selected raw ingredients to cook at home
 - More places to buy food near their home

The team conducting the community survey also conducted 3 community listening sessions with 30 total participants. Key findings are summarized briefly below.¹⁰

¹⁰ See Appendix B on pp. 100-107 of Montgomery County Strategic Plan to End Childhood Hunger for full discussion of engagement discussions

- Participants identified the difficulties of the COVID-19 pandemic and high cost of living as major barriers to food access
- High cost of living and lack of income, including loss of employment in their household, high costs of childcare, persisting medical bills, responsibility to care for family members, created instability and uncertainty around households' ability to afford nutritious food
- Mothers in large families shared that they had difficulty buying enough food to feed their entire family, and needing to go to multiple emergency food assistance providers in order to get enough food for the household
- Participants shared difficulties regarding travel and accessing food without personal transportation (like a car) and the extra time required to use public transportation
- Spanish-speaking participants cited the importance of culturally-relevant foods in their household and a consistent lack of culturally-appropriate foods at food distribution sites
- Spanish-speaking participants described difficulties with applying for food assistance benefits, including:
 - Stigma, discrimination, and disrespect from staff at government agencies when applying for benefits
 - Lack of Spanish-speaking staff and application materials at agencies
 - Confusing and complex applications
- Immigrant participants cited inadequate identification and documentation to receive benefits

Survey Discussion

These findings highlighted the intersecting roles of economic security and accessibility of food retailers on food insecurity. It is important to contextualize these findings with respect to demographics of participants. The survey is unlikely to be representative of the needs of the entire Montgomery

County population due to the high representation of people with low and moderate incomes relative to higher income earners. Eighty-two percent of households surveyed reported incomes between \$15,000 and \$80,000; in comparison, about 24% of households in Montgomery County have incomes between \$15,000 and \$75,000, and 60% of households in the County have incomes above \$100,000. The average household size in the survey was 4.5, while the average household size for Montgomery County is about 2.7.

Racial demographics are comparable to Montgomery County, with some overrepresentation of White respondents. Given the demographics of the survey, the findings should be understood as applying to larger households with low and moderate incomes (populations that are considered to be at higher risk of experiencing food insecurity). In a survey where 94% of households had incomes below \$80,000, the finding that 89% of households reported experiencing food insecurity highlights significant need for this income demographic in Montgomery County.

The survey highlights the impact of access to the social safety net on households experiencing food insecurity. These findings were used to make recommendations in the County, including the creation of the MC Groceries program, which is effective at both increasing the purchasing power of households with moderate incomes such that they don't qualify for food assistance programs like SNAP but still experience food insecurity; partnership with Instacart also means that delivery is an option for people who may have difficulty accessing grocery stores.

Current Policy Conditions

In addition to existing needs highlighted in the Childhood Hunger Survey, there are a number of pressing issues related that may affect Montgomery County residents and may exacerbate food insecurity. This includes continuing economic pressures from high cost of living in the US and Montgomery County; future cuts to social safety net programs; and vulnerability of immigrant populations in the US.

Economic Conditions

Economic insecurity is an issue directly related to food insecurity. People with low incomes or who live in high-cost areas are more likely to have difficulty affording nutritious food. One particularly strong indicator of affordability and economic conditions for residents is housing cost burden; people who pay more than 30% of their income towards housing costs are often considered to be housing cost burdened. Roughly 50% of renters in Montgomery County paid more than 30% of their income towards housing costs in 2021, while 23% of renters are estimated to pay more than 50% of their income towards housing costs.¹¹ These are indicative of the high cost of living in Montgomery County which significantly affects people with the lowest incomes.

Future Cuts to Social Safety Net Programs

There are impending cuts to federal spending, reduction of benefits, and loss of eligibility for social safety net and food assistance programs like Medicaid, and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), that were approved in the One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBBA) on July 4, 2025. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) also proposed a \$300 million cut to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) in its Fiscal Year (FY) 2026 budget.

The Childhood Hunger Survey highlighted the importance of broad economic security in households' ability to afford food; households that qualify for Medicaid, SNAP, and WIC are already experiencing economic instability, and cuts or complete loss of benefits are likely to exacerbate this instability.

The OBBBA has authorized a number of upcoming changes to the SNAP program that will affect beneficiaries. Major changes include loss of eligibility for many previously-eligible immigrant, refugee, and asylee populations;

¹¹ Montgomery County Planning, "Overview of Rental Housing in Montgomery County," 2023, <https://montgomeryplanningboard.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Housing-Roundtable-Rental-Housing-1.pdf> p. 10

elimination of waivers for work requirements for veterans, unhoused people, and young adults recently aged out of the foster care system; broadening the age cap for people that must comply with work requirements; and restrictions on future changes to the benefit formula. These changes will make it more difficult to qualify and maintain eligibility for SNAP and reduce benefits for participants.

The federal government is also shifting the cost burden of programs onto states. States will be responsible for funding increasing portions of their benefits amounts if they have payment error rates above 6% (which applies to all but one state), and they will be responsible for funding 75% of administrative costs for SNAP. Maryland's current payment error rate above 10% will result in an additional annual cost responsibility of about \$225 million (which could go down if the payment error rate falls below 6%), while the 75% administrative cost sharing will require the State to pay an additional \$58 million each year. If the State of Maryland does not have sufficient funds to cover the additional amount required, Maryland may be put in the difficult position of cutting benefits for recipients or limiting eligibility access if it cannot afford the additional cost.

Vulnerability of Immigrant Populations

In the face of increased federal immigration enforcement, and uncertainty about future enforcement, many immigrants may feel unsafe applying for food assistance or seeking assistance from food distribution organizations. People previously experiencing food insecurity and experiencing ongoing economic hardship now may not be seeking assistance they need for fear that they may encounter immigration enforcement. This has already occurred in Montgomery County, with food assistance providers noting multiple instances of reduced attendance at food distributions in the wake of increased immigration enforcement in the country.¹²

¹² Cooper, Kyle, "Md. pastor of church pantry: Community members 'are scared to come get the food' due to immigration crackdown," February 3, 2025, <https://wtop.com/montgomery-county/2025/02/a-local-pastor-says-immigrants-are-scared-to-show-up-at-his-church-food-pantry/>.

What is Montgomery County currently doing to address food insecurity?

Montgomery County currently employs a number of strategies to address food insecurity through its Office of Food Systems Resilience (OFSR). OFSR operates a number of grants that are available to community organizations to fund programs addressing food insecurity in Montgomery County. These grants include the Community Food Assistance (CFA) grant, School-Based Food Assistance Program (SBFA), and Food as Medicine (FM) grant.

Through the Community Food Assistance grant, OFSR provides funding to organizations to support the purchase of shelf-stable food, fresh food, and/or prepared meals to residents of Montgomery County. Through this program, OFSR hopes to facilitate increased access to locally sourced and culturally relevant food options among residents who experience food insecurity. In FY2025, OFSR awarded approximately \$3.7 million to 49 community organizations for the CFA grant, resulting in the distribution of 1.6 million meals, serving an average of 942 families per month.¹³

The SBFA program is intended to support organizations that administer food assistance programs in Montgomery County schools to address access gaps for children and families experiencing food insecurity. In FY2025, OFSR awarded about \$1.25 million in funding to 11 organizations providing food assistance in over 60 schools in Montgomery County. Organizations served

DuPree, Kevon, “Montgomery County food bank sees drop in clients due to deportation concerns,” June 6, 2025, <https://www.dcnnewsnow.com/news/local-news/montgomery-county/montgomery-county-food-bank-sees-drop-in-clients-due-to-deportation-concerns/>.

Bixby, Ginny, “‘People are afraid’: Fewer clients show up at local food pantries due to deportation concerns,” June 4, 2025, <https://bethesdamagazine.com/2025/06/04/food-pantries-ice-deportation-concerns/>.

¹³ Montgomery County Office of Food Systems Resilience, “Community Food Assistance Grant Program,” accessed June 2025, <https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/ofsr/grants/community.html>.

268,000 pounds of food to 49,000 students in about 34,000 households.¹⁴ In FY2026, OFSR is expected to award about \$2.3 million for this grant.

The Food as Medicine grant provides funding to organizations that focus on the connection between health outcomes and access to nutritious, locally produced, affordable, medically necessary, and culturally relevant foods. Organizations receive funding to screen pediatric patients for food insecurity and diet-related illnesses, provide nutritious food, and share nutrition education to support people who lack adequate access to foods they need to live a healthy and dignified lifestyle. In FY2024, OFSR awarded about \$450,000 to five groups, who provided food security screenings to about 1800 children in 566 households and distributed roughly 93,000 pounds of food. In FY2025, OFSR provided about \$750,000 to 6 organizations providing services, aiming to screen 1500 pediatric patients in 700 households.¹⁵

What can the County Council do to improve food security?

Increase frequency of data collection regarding community needs for hunger and food insecurity in Montgomery County.

The Childhood Hunger Survey conducted in 2022 highlighted how residents in Montgomery County are affected by food insecurity, and how they would be best supported by different policies or programs to reduce food insecurity. While this survey was conducted recently, there have been a number of changes to socioeconomic conditions for people in the U.S. and additional instability may occur due to federal cuts to social safety net programs. Regularly conducting community needs surveys for food security, like the Childhood Hunger Survey in 2022, would be a helpful practice for the County to make informed policy decisions. It would also provide useful information to the County in the face of potential economic insecurity that residents face.

¹⁴ Montgomery County Office of Food Systems Resilience, “School-Based Food Assistance Grant Program,” accessed June 2025, <https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/ofsr/grants/school-based.html>.

¹⁵ Montgomery County Office of Food Systems Resilience, “Food as Medicine Grant Program,” accessed June 2025, <https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/ofsr/grants/medicine.html>.

OFSR engages in valuable data collection for existing grants and programs, but there may be people who do not interact with OFSR programs and may not be reached by this data collection. OFSR also does not currently collect information on County-wide food insecurity. To implement this recommendation, the County could conduct an independent food insecurity survey; leverage partnerships with community organizations like the Montgomery County Food Council to conduct a food insecurity survey; or utilize existing surveys and data collection opportunities, such as the Healthy Montgomery County Health Needs Assessment, to ask participants about hunger and food insecurity issues.

Leverage program evaluations, community surveys, and community partnerships to identify relevant opportunities for policy intervention and public-private partnerships for retail access programs that mitigate barriers to food access for Montgomery County residents.

OFSR currently leverages program evaluation tools for grants and programs to understand what populations are served, strengths and weaknesses of programs, and to gain community insight on best practices. The County can leverage ongoing and future evaluation efforts, along with community knowledge, to determine the value of implementing various food retail access programs in the county.

Retail access involves programs and strategies that either improve access to food retail options or increase the purchasing power of consumers. A lot of existing food assistance work can be understood as retail access programs. Below are a list and short description of existing retail access models that exist across the U.S.. Based on County needs, budgets, and logistics, the County Council can review this non-exhaustive list of models and work with OFSR and the Montgomery County community to consider which, if any, of these models may be most effective for the community.

A significant component of OFSR food assistance programs involve administration of a number of grants for community organizations to provide

food assistance services to County residents; the County could provide OFSR with additional funding for a grant model for solicitations of retail access models for residents in the County, or the County could leverage public policy to support implementation of its own retail access program.

Financial Assistance

One form of retail access comes in the form of financial support to increase consumer purchasing power. This includes cash-assistance, in-kind benefits, vouchers and gift cards, or dollar-matching programs. Federal programs like Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) can offer direct cash assistance for low-income families, where recipients who qualify for benefits can self-determinedly spend cash assistance on goods and services--like groceries. SNAP is a federal program providing in-kind financial assistance to low-income individuals to buy food of their choosing in participating retailers. Monthly benefits are loaded onto an EBT card and can only be used to purchase certain foods at approved retailers, and unspent funds do not roll over into the following month. Direct cash assistance allows recipients the freedom of choice to purchase goods and services that they want without limitation, though there is no guarantee that money received will be spent on food items. In-kind benefits for food assistance like SNAP and WIC provide much-needed financial assistance to recipients that specifically focuses on purchasing food items according to individual need and choice.

MC Groceries in Montgomery County is an example of a local in-kind food assistance program for low-income families. The cash value of Instacart Fresh Funds allows participants to use their money at participating retailers. This program also acts as a means of increasing accessibility of groceries because of the option for delivery through the Instacart app. One major downside of in-kind food assistance programs is that use of benefits is limited to stores that participate in a given benefit program; while many large commercial retailers accept SNAP or WIC as a form of payment, smaller grocery stores may not have the technology or infrastructure to accept SNAP, which can limit choice

for consumers. MC Groceries faces a similar limitation, as purchases can only be made through the Instacart app.

When some grocery stores do not accept SNAP payments or use Instacart, families who wish to use food assistance benefits to purchase culturally relevant foods at ethnic grocery stores or to shop at a local grocer, families may not be able to purchase all the foods they want. Manna Food Center in Montgomery County operates a voucher program for families who wish to purchase foods at small ethnic grocery stores in the region.¹⁶ This voucher program can be valuable for families who might want to use their SNAP or MC Groceries benefits at smaller retailers that sell culturally relevant foods but find that their preferred grocer does not accept payment. If a particular retailer does not participate in the SNAP or does not accept Instacart services, families may be able to use vouchers instead. This was a unique program designed by Manna in the wake of the pandemic, when the organization's emergency food assistance was unable to provide Ethiopian recipients with injera, a staple food in Ethiopian cuisine. Manna used these vouchers as a means of connecting food insecure households with local grocery stores who could provide this food to people who needed it.

Other national and local efforts provide dollar-matching incentives for SNAP recipients using their monthly benefits to purchase fresh produce at a food retail location, like grocery stores or farmers markets. The Double-Up program is a national program offered in more than 25 states where someone purchasing fresh produce with SNAP benefits can get double the quantity of the produce, up to a specified limit (i.e. produce valued at \$20 can be purchased for \$10 in SNAP benefits).¹⁷ The Rockville Farmers Market offers a

¹⁶ Food Bank News, "Manna's Voucher Program Supports 'Ultimate Choice'," April 8, 2024, <https://foodbanknews.org/annas-voucher-program-supports-ultimate-choice/>.

¹⁷ Double Up Fresh Bucks program for SNAP recipients – national program where fresh produce is discounted if purchasing with SNAP benefits
Double Up Fresh Bucks, accessed July 2025, <https://doubleupamerica.org/>

similar dollar-matching program for shoppers using SNAP and WIC benefits, up to \$15 per week.¹⁸

Increased Access to Retail infrastructure

Retail infrastructure captures strategies that facilitate the development of food retail operations. Examples discussed below include government-operated grocery stores; grocery stores that are publicly-owned, cooperatives, or not-for-profit; and market strategies to increase the quantity of fresh produce available in corner and convenience stores.

Nonprofit grocery stores and cooperative grocery stores present a model that shifts focus away from the profit-motive and instead focuses on breaking even to provide healthy, nutritious food and benefits for customers. StarkFresh is a nonprofit organization working to address food insecurity in Stark County, Ohio. The organization has operated a not-for-profit grocery store in the city of Alliance since October 2023. The Salvation Army began operation of a nonprofit grocery store, DMG Foods, in Baltimore, MD in 2018, before closing in 2021 due to business declines during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁹ Takoma Park Silver Spring Co-op is a cooperative business that has operated in the DMV since 1981. As a cooperative business, they are owned by customers who shop there and have maintained success since their opening.²⁰

Government-operated grocery stores involve government involvement in operation of grocery stores. As a public operation, a government-run grocery store does not necessarily have to turn a profit but can instead focus on breaking even (following the model of nonprofit grocery stores) or operating at a small loss that residents knowingly pay for with their tax dollars, utilizing government power to create economic incentives to subsidize operation and

¹⁸ City of Rockville, “Rockville Eat Fresh Farmers Market,” accessed July 2025, <https://www.rockvillemd.gov/1236/Eat-Fresh-Rockville-SNAPEBT-FMNP-WIC>

¹⁹ Esparaza, David. “Non-Profit Grocery Store: Doing the Most Good (DMG) Foods,” Engage3, June 2, 2019, <https://www.engage3.com/2019/06/dmg-foods/>.

²⁰ Takoma Park Silver Spring Co-Op, “About the TPSS Co-Op,” accessed July 2025, <https://tpss.coop/about/>

reduce operating costs. If the government owned the land, it would not need to pay rent; as a government entity, there could be provisions to reduce requirements to pay local sales or property taxes. As an institution that does not need to focus on maximizing profit, the government can instead keep prices low for consumers, with planned investments in the purchasing of goods and services that create real value for residents. The instance where this would be most needed (and is often the scenario that facilitates this type of government intervention) would be in the case of closure of a major retailer or if there is consistent difficulty landing a retailer to open in a neighborhood with a clear need for a grocery store, (i.e. a food desert). If the County or the local government face long-term difficulty creating incentives for a grocery store to open, one option may be to open a government-operated grocery store to ensure that residents have access to affordable, nutritious food.

The small, rural city of St. Paul, Kansas has owned and operated a grocery store since 2013, turning a 3% annual profit.²¹ The store was originally constructed through collaboration between the city, a local economic development corporation, and the local electrical cooperative. This grocery store served as the model of inspiration for the government acquisition of a closing grocery store in nearby Erie, Kansas in 2020. The city of Madison, Wisconsin is preparing to open its own grocery store in late 2025, while Atlanta and Chicago are both exploring options for government-involved grocery retail.

Other methods to increase accessibility of nutritious food have occurred with private organizations working to increase the supply of fresh produce in corner and convenience stores. Corner stores are known for their lack of nutritious food options and face difficulty with selling fresh produce effectively due to high unit prices when purchasing small quantities of goods and difficulty with turnaround times of foods with short shelf lives. Noting the difficulties for corner stores to purchase fresh produce at affordable prices, Saba Grocers in

²¹ Waters, Michael, "The small town that saved its only grocery store – by buying it," September 11, 2022, <https://thehustle.co/the-small-town-that-saved-its-only-grocery-store-by-buying-it>.

Oakland, California; FreshCrate in Baltimore, Maryland; and DC Central Kitchen all work as individual distributors for corner stores in their respective communities by purchasing produce at wholesale prices while selling produce in smaller quantities at more affordable prices for corner stores, who can then sell produce at affordable prices to consumers.²²

Retail Food Delivery and Access

Retail food delivery and access programs aim to mitigate issues of transportation and physical accessibility of food retail for residents. Examples include programs that provide options for organized ordering and/or delivery of groceries to a central location or a person's location of their choice. MC Groceries, through its partnership with Instacart, offers deliveries from participating retailers to households participating in the program. The Baltimore Virtual Supermarket Program offered residents of Baltimore, Maryland with limited transportation and mobility, with the option to order groceries in central locations throughout the city, including libraries, schools, senior housing facilities, and other locations.²³

Meal retail providers

Meal retail providers increase food access by providing prepared nutritious meals at more affordable prices for people with low and moderate incomes, or provide meals for free to people experiencing homelessness or food insecurity. EveryTable is a for-profit public benefit corporation with multiple

²² Saba grocers in Oakland, CA acts as a wholesale purchaser of grocery items and sells them at affordable prices to corner stores

Saba Grocers Initiative, "Programs," accessed July 2025, <https://www.sabagrocers.org/programs#vendors>.

FreshCrate program through Loyola University selling produce at cost to small convenience stores in Baltimore

Trickey, Erick, "How Baltimore Is Experimenting Its Way Out of the Food Desert," January 23, 2020,

<https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/01/23/baltimore-food-desert-policy-100121>.

DC Central Kitchen, "Healthy Corners," accessed July 2025, <https://dccentralkitchen.org/healthy-corners/>.

²³ Baltimore City Health Department, "Virtual Supermarket," March 19, 2018,

<https://health.baltimorecity.gov/news/press-releases/2018-03-19-bchd-launches-new-site-food-access-low-income-senior-residents>.

restaurant locations throughout Los Angeles.²⁴ Their model utilizes a sliding scale of prices for their meals based on the socioeconomic status of the neighborhood that a particular restaurant operates in. Agape is an organization sourcing and diverting unsold or excess food from commercial retailers to provide high-quality meals to people experiencing food insecurity or who are unhoused.²⁵ DC Central Kitchen organizes a more typical meal distribution model, sourcing ingredients and volunteers to provide meals to unhoused people, while also utilizing culinary workforce training as a means of economic development by providing jobs training to people experiencing persistent joblessness, such as unhoused people, people from marginalized socioeconomic backgrounds, or formerly incarcerated people.²⁶

Each of the retail access models described above can be useful in reducing food insecurity in Montgomery County (some programs discussed are already operating in Montgomery County: MC Groceries, Manna Food Vouchers, and the Rockville Farmers Market dollar matching); there are countless other emerging models that the County can consider, but these models may be useful to further support and cultivate in the County.

²⁴ EveryTable in California offers a sliding scale of prices, with higher menu prices in high-income neighborhoods and lower menu prices in lower-income neighborhoods
EveryTable, “Everytable Makes Good Food Available to Everyone, No Exceptions,” January 10, 2020, <https://www.calwellness.org/stories/everytable/>.

²⁵ Agape Food Rescue in NYC takes donated grocery items and makes fresh meals for homeless shelters, soup kitchens, and community organizations to give to food insecure people
Sheldon, Marissa, “Agape Food Rescue Prepares Meals from Donated Food for Food-Insecure Individuals in NYC,” October 17, 2023, <https://www.nycfoodpolicy.org/community-spotlight-agape-food-rescue/>.

²⁶ DC Central Kitchen is one example of a nonprofit that offers culinary work training as a means of economic development
DC Central Kitchen, accessed July 2025, <https://dccentralkitchen.org/enroll/>.

Increase the number of families participating in the MCGroceries program in anticipation of future cuts and instability of social safety net and food access programs like SNAP, Commodity Supplemental Food Program, Medicaid, and Meals on Wheels.

The MCGroceries program has proved an effective way to support families who do not qualify for SNAP but still have low and moderate incomes such that they may experience food insecurity. This program meets many of the preferred means of mitigating barriers to food access that were identified by participants: economic barriers (such as inadequate income); difficulty accessing desired foods; and difficulty accessing food retailers.

As a retail access program, it increases the purchasing power of families who may have limited options to access food retail while allowing them the power and dignity to choose which foods they purchase. The program thus far has supported 469 families in FY2024.²⁷ OFSR is currently in the process of evaluating outcomes for the first year of funding for participants and is preparing to distribute funds to participants for a second year.

The income demographics of eligible participants fall along the lines of those in the Childhood Hunger Survey. Families are eligible to receive up to \$100 per child per month (up to \$400 per family) if they have at least one child who is ineligible for SNAP and the household's total income falls below 400% of the Federal Poverty Level (for a family of 4, this is about \$128,000).²⁸ As discussed above, 93% of survey respondents reported an income below \$80,000, and 89% of respondents reported moderate or high food insecurity in 2022.

In addition to the need outlined in the 2022 Child Hunger Survey, Americans are facing increasing economic instability and cuts to social safety net and food assistance programs that threaten to exacerbate ongoing issues. As

²⁷ Montgomery County Office of Food Systems Resilience, "Montgomery County OFSR Impact Report 2024," 2024, https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/ofsr/Resources/Files/Impact_Report_2024.pdf.

²⁸ Montgomery County Office of Food Systems Resilience, "MC Groceries Program Frequently Asked Questions," accessed July 2025, <https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/ofsr/grocery-program/grocery-faqs.html>.

discussed above, changes to the SNAP program will reduce federal funding and make it more difficult for people to qualify or maintain eligibility for food assistance. With MC Groceries acting as a program to fill the gap between unmet need for families who do not qualify for SNAP but do not have high enough incomes to fully support themselves, creating an additional investment in the program to increase the number of families that participate will help the county proactively support families who experience food insecurity, lose SNAP benefits, or lose SNAP eligibility entirely.

Racial Equity and Social Justice Impact Statement

In aggregate, programs and policies addressing food insecurity should be designed to have the most impact on people experiencing food insecurity. Addressing food insecurity should improve the lived conditions of people experiencing food insecurity, a population disproportionately made up of Black and Latino people and people with low-incomes, so addressing food insecurity is likely to improve conditions for these populations.²⁹ The specific effects of a program or policy on different demographics will depend on how targeted a given program or policy is for the populations in need. Programs that target services based on need or intentionally prioritize historically marginalized communities will have the greatest effect on those populations.

Conclusion

The Montgomery County Council should consider each of the above recommendations in order to strengthen the County's response to food insecurity due to impending policy changes that are likely to increase food insecurity for residents. The 2022 Childhood Hunger Survey demonstrated pressing concerns for food security among residents with low and moderate incomes. Eighty-nine percent of respondents, 94% of whom made \$80,000 or less, reported experiencing moderate or severe food insecurity. There are also three significant contemporary factors that may exacerbate food insecurity for

²⁹ Feeding America, "Map the Meal Gap 2025," May 2025, <https://www.feedingamerica.org/sites/default/files/2025-05/Map%20the%20Meal%20Gap%202025%20Report.pdf>, p. 25.

Montgomery County residents: current economic conditions and looming economic insecurity; cuts to federal social safety net programs; and vulnerability of immigrant populations. Montgomery County can consider three recommendations to mitigate food insecurity for residents: 1) increasing collection of food county-wide food insecurity data; 2) leveraging OFSR and community knowledge to implement food retail access programs; and 3) allocate additional investment in MC Groceries.