



# COMMUNITY SNAPSHOT: Food Security



United Way  
of East Central Iowa



# Financial Stability

## The Importance of Food

Food is essential to our daily lives. A healthy, balanced diet is the first line of defense against disease. The quantity and quality of food we consume affects not only our quality of life, but also our productivity; we need nutrients to be energized and ready for work or school.

However, many in our community don't have consistent access to food. These people have difficulty at work or school, aren't as healthy, and must constantly make difficult decisions every day, like choosing between paying rent and feeding their children. Similarly, do they use the last of their gas to drive to a food bank or save it so they can get to work tomorrow?

## What Is Food Insecurity?

Food insecurity means lacking stable access to affordable, healthy, and culturally-appropriate food. Access covers a variety of barriers including inability to afford food, no reliable transportation to food, or lack of diet-appropriate food available.

## Figure 1

Wage: \$9.50 per hour

CINDY'S MONTHLY BUDGET <sup>5</sup>		
Monthly Expenses	No Public Assistance	With Public Assistance
Rent and Utilities	\$723	\$723
Healthcare	\$573	\$0
Transportation	\$639	\$639
Food	\$392	\$35
Childcare	\$565	\$147
Other Household Expenses	\$271	\$271
<b>Total Needed (Basic Needs)</b>	<b>\$3,163</b>	<b>\$1,815</b>
<b>Gross Monthly Income</b>	<b>\$1,520</b>	<b>\$1,520</b>
<b>Deficit</b>	<b>-\$1,643</b>	<b>-\$295</b>

## How Many Are Food Insecure?

In UWECI's five-county service area, about one in eight, nearly 35,120 people, are food insecure<sup>1</sup>. 74% of these food insecure individuals reside in Linn County.

## How Do Families Deal with Food Insecurity?

One of the most common ways families deal with food insecurity is through SNAP benefits, formerly known as food stamps. Many people rely on SNAP to supplement income in order to purchase food and feed their families. The need for SNAP benefits has increased across the United States, especially within Cedar Rapids. In 2014, approximately 13,155 households used SNAP in UWECI's five-county service area, and 57% of these families resided in Cedar Rapids. With the need for SNAP on the rise, why do families still suffer from food insecurity?

Meet Cindy, a single mother with a two-year-old named Sarah. Cindy makes \$9.50 per hour as a full-time CNA at a local nursing home. To make sure she and Sarah get the nutritional value they need, she must spend at least \$392 per month on food. **Figure 1** shows Cindy's budget before taxes and without any public assistance.

## Who Is Most Likely to Be Food Insecure?<sup>2</sup>

### Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Users in Linn County



**1 in 6 SNAP users**  
→ 60 years or older



**3 in 4 SNAP users**  
→ Families of color



**1 in 2 SNAP users**  
→ Single-mother households



Cindy's budget does not balance. Even though she is working full time, and in a semi-skilled position, she needs \$1,643 more per month to meet her basic needs. This is why public assistance to low-income families is critical. At her current wage working full time, she qualifies for \$357 in SNAP benefits, roughly \$418 in childcare assistance, and healthcare coverage. While Cindy's budget still does not balance, she is in a much better position to provide for her family.

Receiving the full amount of SNAP benefits is important to low-income families. Families often do not receive the full amount they qualify for. The average monthly amount provided to those eligible for SNAP benefits in Linn County is only \$113 . If Cindy only receives \$113 per month, she will be short \$539. In Cedar Rapids, single mothers with one child receive as low as \$19 per month. This places an even larger burden on Cindy, which means she'll need to make difficult decisions in order to meet her family's basic needs.

### Difficult Decisions

To make up for the gap in their budget, many low-income families either try to find another part-time job or get a wage increase at their current job. Even though this means that she will have less time to spend with Sarah, Cindy decides to get a part-time job making minimum wage and working an extra 10 hours per week so she can better support her family and fill the gap left by not receiving her full SNAP benefit. She now works 50 hours per week and has an extra \$290 per month.

However, in Cindy's attempt to make enough to meet her needs, she now makes too much money to qualify for SNAP, childcare assistance, and healthcare assistance. Instead of having an extra \$290 for food, she actually has \$1,353 less per month as illustrated in **Figure 2**.

### The Benefits Cliff<sup>5</sup>

This phenomenon is called the Benefits Cliff. Low-income families are stuck in the cycle of finding ways to make more money that actually make it harder to meet basic needs (illustrated in **Figure 3**).

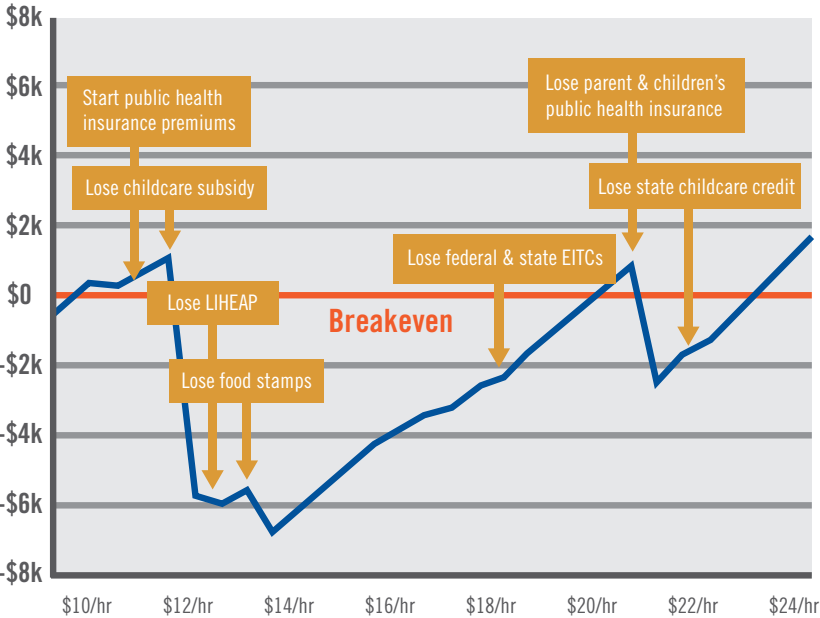
Public assistance programs help low-income families' meet their basic needs until they make enough money so they no longer need assistance. However, critical benefits for low-income families drop off as they make more money, but not enough money to meet their basic needs. The result is that low-income families are stuck in a place where they still aren't meeting their basic needs, but it is the best they can do unless they get a significant wage increase. In Cindy's case, she would need to increase her hourly wage to \$21 per hour, more than a 100% increase in her wages. For many families, unless they meet basic needs, achieving higher wages can be nearly impossible.

Filling gaps in basic needs is a critical way that United Way helps families. Providing for needs like food helps reduce volatility created by the benefits cliff, but it is clear that pathways to higher earnings is essential to helping families get out of poverty.. Low-income households can start planning for the future, instead of constantly worrying about how they will get their next meal. Families are able to obtain skills and training to get higher wage jobs that help them smoothly transition off the cliff, off of public assistance, and start meeting basic needs by their own efforts.

**Figure 2: \$9.50 per hour + \$290 extra**

CINDY'S MONTHLY BUDGET	
Monthly Expenses	Cost
Childcare	\$565
Food	\$392
Healthcare	\$573
Rent and Utilities	\$723
Transportation	\$639
Other Household Expenses	\$271
Total Needed for Basic Needs	\$3,163
Gross Monthly Income	\$1,810
Deficit	-\$1,353

**Figure 3: Annual Net Resources**



## How We Are Responding

United Way of East Central Iowa has always worked to feed families. That's why we support a number of community initiatives that fill the gaps in our community and ensure our families receive sustenance needed to be healthy, happy, and productive members of this community.

### Food Reservoir at HACAP

The Food Reservoir collects millions of pounds of food that they redistribute to local pantries, saving them more than \$2 million per year by removing the constant stress of finding food. The Food Reservoir also provides more than 6,000 food boxes per year to families in need and provides more than 2,300 children with backpacks full of food to eat during the weekend and school vacations.

### Healthy Horizons for Older Adults

Meals on Wheels provides hot, fresh, and often local food seven days per week to homebound elderly, as well as customizable nutrition plans and counseling. The program ensures safety, wellness, and emotional and social support with volunteers. Last year, Meals on Wheels provided food to 3,346 individuals in United Way's service area.

### Food Environment Alliance

The Food Environment Alliance works to reduce food insecurity by increasing availability of healthy food options to low-income residents. The Alliance includes more than 30 different public, private, and nonprofit organizations. United Way of East Central Iowa has been a member of the Food Environment Alliance since its inception in 2013.

**From these programs, entire families improved their situation and been given the resources for healthy, nutritious food:**

- 4.19 million pounds of food distributed into the community last year, saving partner agencies more than \$6 million
- Since 2012, more than 12 million pounds of food distributed to local food pantries serving families and seniors
- 3,296 seniors reported increased access to nutritious, low-cost food
- 6,445 rural Linn County residents were served home cooked meals by the Southeast Linn Community Center

**Visit [uweci.org/reports](http://uweci.org/reports) or contact  
United Way staff for more information.**

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## Success Stories

### Food Reservoir

Omarion is an eight-year-old enrolled at Taylor Elementary in Cedar Rapids. He and his four siblings live with their grandmother, who worked two jobs to support her grandkids. When she fell ill and could no longer work, Omarion enrolled in Operation Backpack at Taylor Elementary, a program through HACAP's Food Reservoir. Now, Omarion takes a backpack full of nutritious food home every Friday that lasts the entire weekend. Omarion said, "We get healthy food for our stomachs so we can be happy and proud of our grandma."

### Meals on Wheels

During a meal delivery, a Meals on Wheels volunteer discovered that William Anderson, a senior resident of Cedar Rapids, had fallen on the stairs at the entry of his home. With the assistance of Meals on Wheels, Mr. Anderson was able to get inside and contact his son for further assistance. By providing face-to-face contact on a daily basis, Meals on Wheels helped Mr. Anderson in a timely manner in addition to increasing his access to nutritious food.

## Sources

<sup>1</sup> Map the Meal Gap." Food Insecurity by County. Feeding America, n.d. Web. Dec. 2016. <<http://feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/hunger-studies/map-the-meal-gap/printable-county-2011.aspx>>.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Census Bureau; American Community Survey, 2010-2014 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, Table S2201; generated using American FactFinder for Cedar Rapids geographies; <<http://factfinder2.census.gov>>; (March 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Fisher, Peter. "Part 1: Basic Family Budgets." The Cost of Living in Iowa — 2016 Edition (2016): n. pag. The Iowa Policy Project. Apr. 2016. Web. 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Greder, Kimberly, and Liesl Eathington. "Basic Needs." Poverty and Food Needs (2016): n. pag. Iowa State University, Mar. 2016. Web. Apr. 2016.

<sup>5</sup> "Work Supports and Cliff Effect." The Iowa Policy Project. N.p., 2011. Web. 2015. <<http://www.iowapolicyproject.org/110208-cliffs.html>>.