

PARENTING/GIVING BACK

How Families Can Combat Food Insecurity in Their Communities

Get involved through volunteering, starting a Little Free Pantry and more

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Kids understand what it means to be hungry. Every child can remember melting down after a missed snack or struggling to concentrate during the last class before lunchtime. Living in one of the [richest states](https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/slideshows/10-wealthiest-states-in-america?slide=5) (<https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/slideshows/10-wealthiest-states-in-america?slide=5>) in one of the [richest countries](https://www.worldometers.info/gdp/gdp-per-capita/) (<https://www.worldometers.info/gdp/gdp-per-capita/>) in the world, it's hard to believe that these are daily experiences for many children in our community. But hunger and food insecurity are widespread – just drive by a local food bank on a distribution day and see the line circling the block.

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According to [Northwest Harvest \(https://www.northwestharvest.org/covid-19-response/\)](https://www.northwestharvest.org/covid-19-response/), 850,000 people in Washington struggle to put food on the table each year, with one out of every six children in the state living in a food-insecure household. The pandemic has turned an already serious problem into a second crisis. The first [Washington State Food Security Survey \(https://news.wsu.edu/press-release/2020/11/19/wsu-helping-washington-families-facing-food-insecurity/\)](https://news.wsu.edu/press-release/2020/11/19/wsu-helping-washington-families-facing-food-insecurity/), which was conducted in 2020 by a team of professors and researchers from Washington State University, the University of Washington and Tacoma Community College, found that 30 percent of Washington state households experienced food insecurity in the first five months of the pandemic. Of those households, 59 percent were families with children living in the home.

Fortunately, it's easy for the whole family to take action together to make a difference. Start by working through [Feeding America's Hungry to Help Family Action Plan \(https://www.feedingamerica.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/feeding-america-family-action-plan.pdf\)](https://www.feedingamerica.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/feeding-america-family-action-plan.pdf) with your child. Then try one or more of these all-ages actions to help feed the hungry.

Volunteer.

Numerous organizations throughout the Puget Sound region work to feed the hungry. Although in-person volunteer opportunities are somewhat limited due to the pandemic, food banks and soup kitchens are among the most welcoming of youth volunteers and family-group volunteers. [Food Lifeline \(https://foodlifeline.org/individualsfamilies/\)](https://foodlifeline.org/individualsfamilies/) is a local affiliate of Feeding America. The organization welcomes families with children ages 10 and older for in-person volunteering at its centralized distribution center in South Seattle, which supplies food banks. You can also use [Food Lifeline's map \(https://foodlifeline.org/need-food/#foodmap\)](https://foodlifeline.org/need-food/#foodmap) to find the food bank or meal program nearest you and contact them to see how your family can help. [Teen Feed \(https://www.parentmap.com/article/nonprofit-teen-feed-runs-radical-compassion\)](https://www.parentmap.com/article/nonprofit-teen-feed-runs-radical-compassion) runs off-site food programs that allow families to cook meals at home to feed homeless teens.

Organize a food drive or fundraiser.

If your kids are too young to volunteer in person, they can still help you organize a food drive or a fundraiser. The [Phinney Neighborhood Association \(https://www.phinneycenter.org/volunteer/hot-meal/\)](https://www.phinneycenter.org/volunteer/hot-meal/) has a food-drive system to support its hot meal program; Food Lifeline encourages [old-school canned food drives \(https://foodlifeline.org/canned-food-drive/\)](https://foodlifeline.org/canned-food-drive/); and Feeding America provides guidance for how to [arrange a food drive with your neighborhood food bank \(https://www.feedingamerica.org/ways-to-give/food-drives\)](https://www.feedingamerica.org/ways-to-give/food-drives).

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Because of the pandemic, many food banks are not accepting food donations right now. But [Hopelink \(https://www.hopelink.org/take-action/end-family-hunger\)](https://www.hopelink.org/take-action/end-family-hunger) runs a campaign specifically to address family hunger, providing resources to help you organize your own online fundraiser. [Feeding America](#)

(<https://www.feedingamerica.org/ways-to-give/fundraise-for-feeding-america>) also offers guidance for planning different types of fundraisers, from bake sales to encouraging donations “in lieu of gifts.”

Grow a garden for others.

Everyone deserves to eat healthy food, but because produce is perishable and expensive, canned goods and prepared foods are the backbone of many food programs. Growing food to give away teaches kids about selflessness and nutrition while also getting them exercising outdoors. Start a [vegetable garden in your parking strip](http://www.seattle.gov/transportation/permits-and-services/permits/planting-in-the-right-of-way) (<http://www.seattle.gov/transportation/permits-and-services/permits/planting-in-the-right-of-way>) with a “Help Yourself” sign; plant a row (or dedicate a bed) in your backyard garden for the food bank, or [join a community garden](https://www.seattle.gov/neighborhoods/programs-and-services/p-patch-community-gardening) (<https://www.seattle.gov/neighborhoods/programs-and-services/p-patch-community-gardening>) to grow shareable produce. If you have fruit trees, [City Fruit](https://www.cityfruit.org/) (<https://www.cityfruit.org/>) helps you share what you don’t need so none of it goes to waste.

Many food banks cannot accept your extra zucchini. [Ample Harvest](https://ampleharvest.org/) (<https://ampleharvest.org/>) is a free nationwide registry that enables gardeners to find food pantries in their area. [The University District Food Bank](https://www.udistrictfoodbank.org/involved/grow-produce/) (<https://www.udistrictfoodbank.org/involved/grow-produce/>) is one local option that welcomes your homegrown produce. [Seattle’s Giving Garden Network](http://www.sggcn.org/help/where-to-donate-produce/) (<http://www.sggcn.org/help/where-to-donate-produce/>) also maintains a list of organizations that welcome produce donations.

If you can’t maintain your own garden, your family can help out at Solid Ground’s [Giving Garden at Marra Farm](https://www.solid-ground.org/volunteer/marra-farm-gardener/) (<https://www.solid-ground.org/volunteer/marra-farm-gardener/>) or in the [Beacon Food Forest](https://beaconfoodforest.org/) (<https://beaconfoodforest.org/>).

Join or start a mutual aid network.

Mutual aid societies replace charity with solidarity. They have a [long history within communities of color](https://apnews.com/article/immigration-coronavirus-pandemic-7b1d14f25ab717c2a29ceafd40364b6e) (<https://apnews.com/article/immigration-coronavirus-pandemic-7b1d14f25ab717c2a29ceafd40364b6e>). Locked out of commercial banking, free Black Americans once pooled resources to buy property and help the needy within their communities. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Latino communities formed *sociedades mutualistas*. Similarly, Asian American immigrants formed benevolent associations to preserve their heritage and promote the general welfare of their communities.

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Mutual aid networks sometimes grow into credit unions and formal cooperatives, but they are most likely to be loose, informal groups of friends and neighbors who look out for each other. The pandemic sparked a resurgence in the number of mutual aid networks. [Mutual Aid Hub](https://www.mutualaidhub.org/) (<https://www.mutualaidhub.org/>) is a project that tracks such collective efforts. When the pandemic began, it listed 50 mutual aid groups around the country. Now there are hundreds. You can find one near you on the website’s interactive map, or you can form your own with the people you care about using the [tool kit](https://gdoc.pub/doc/e/2PACX-1vRMxV09kdojzMdyOfapJUOB6Ko2_1iAflm8ELelgma21wlt5HoTqP1QXadF01eZc0ySrPW6VtU_veyyp?) (https://gdoc.pub/doc/e/2PACX-1vRMxV09kdojzMdyOfapJUOB6Ko2_1iAflm8ELelgma21wlt5HoTqP1QXadF01eZc0ySrPW6VtU_veyyp?).

Stock a community fridge or Little Free Pantry.

A [Little Free Pantry](https://www.thelittlefreepantries.org/) (LFP) is just like a Little Free Library, except that instead of (or in addition to) sharing books, you share food and other useful items, such as soap and toothbrushes. The mini-pantry movement is a crowdsourced solution to immediate and local need. Although LFPs don't hold a lot of food, they are "open" at all hours. They also allow you to share perishable food items that food banks may not accept (just make sure you maintain your pantry so it doesn't get dirty and gross). You can help stock a [nearby existing pantry](https://www.thelittlefreepantries.org/find-a-pantry) or [build and host your own](https://www.thelittlefreepantries.org/guides/building). (If you're not handy, you can obtain one from [The Little Free Pantry Project](https://app.smartsheet.com/b/form/0f1c44d9aa204bac988531c2d8f51d24).) During the pandemic, people have started setting up community fridges, too. These outdoor refrigerators provide a no-contact way for anyone to take or donate food. Find out if there's a "[freedge](https://freedge.org/locations/)" near you. Freedges take a little more effort than a pantry, but there is an online community ready to help you [figure out if your family can manage it](https://freedge.org/freedge-yourself/).

Push for policy changes.

Direct aid is important, but hunger is ultimately a question of justice. We will not eliminate food insecurity until we remove systemic inequities that create barriers in our food and economic systems. Parents can educate themselves about these systems. Learn how the U.S. government struggles to [define and measure food insecurity](https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/measurement.aspx) and then study [Northwest Harvest's food justice resources](https://www.northwestharvest.org/resources/?topic=food-justice#resource-list).

Structural inequality may be too complex for most children to understand, but even young children can learn that advocacy is a powerful tool for change. Children must learn to raise their voices if they are to eventually take their place as members of a functioning democracy. That can start by simply speaking up on topics they care about, but they don't have to wait until they are old enough to vote to contact their representatives. [Find out who your legislators are](https://www.northwestharvest.org/get-involved/advocacy/) and help your child write a letter to them in support of [Northwest Harvest's legislative priorities](https://www.northwestharvest.org/get-involved/advocacy/our-legislative-priorities/). If your kid is old enough to have their own email account, they can start to take some virtual action, too, with [Feeding America's petitions and social media campaigns](https://www.feedingamerica.org/take-action/advocate/campaign-to-end-hunger).

Become an ally.

Since food insecurity is a social justice issue, it requires a social justice response. As long as they're doing good work, it may not seem like it matters *who* is helping the hungry. But African Americans are disproportionately affected by both the pandemic and food insecurity, with [Black children more likely to experience hunger](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5823283/) than children of any other

race. According to Feeding America, 24 percent of the Black community experienced food insecurity in 2020. Become an ally by supporting Black-owned businesses and participating in Black-led social justice movements. [Civil Eats](https://civileats.com/2020/06/02/want-to-see-food-and-land-justice-for-black-americans-support-these-groups/) (<https://civileats.com/2020/06/02/want-to-see-food-and-land-justice-for-black-americans-support-these-groups/>) maintains a nationwide list of organizations working to advance Black food sovereignty. Find one whose work speaks to your family and contact that group to ask how you can help. Closer to home, seek out and [support local Black farmers](https://southseattleemerald.com/2020/04/28/farming-for-change-black-womxn-farmers-fight-the-pandemic-with-a-food-revolution/) (<https://southseattleemerald.com/2020/04/28/farming-for-change-black-womxn-farmers-fight-the-pandemic-with-a-food-revolution/>), like those at Nurturing Roots, Percussion Farms and Preserves, and those who are members of the [Black Farmers Collective](https://www.blackfarmerscollective.com/) (<https://www.blackfarmerscollective.com/>). Support farms owned by people of color and stock your own fridge with a [CSA subscription](https://www.seattlemet.com/eat-and-drink/2021/04/bipoc-owned-washington-farms-deliver-to-seattle-csa-boxes) (<https://www.seattlemet.com/eat-and-drink/2021/04/bipoc-owned-washington-farms-deliver-to-seattle-csa-boxes>) – and don't forget to let your kids know who grew their food.

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Discovering the full extent of hunger in the midst of plenty is dismaying, and not a little infuriating. But families can take heart knowing that there are simple, practical actions they can take together to alleviate the immediate needs of the hungry and to dismantle the systems of injustice that perpetuate the problem.

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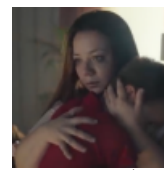
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