

# Testimonial Truths:

## Food Insecurity in Washington, DC from the Community Perspective



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**Abstract**

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*Twelve percent of District of Columbia residents live in poverty and experience food insecurity. This is an atrocious reality, given that this struggling region is the capital of the United States. In response to the challenges of obtaining healthy and affordable food, clients at Bread for the City, a non-profit organization based in Washington, DC, were interviewed about their experiences with hunger and their understanding of its effects in their communities. This report compiles their testimonies, illuminating respondents' views on why food insecurity exists in their neighborhoods and what can be done to alleviate and potentially end hunger. Among key findings were that food insecurity is caused by a wide range of factors, including, but not limited to, inadequate assistance from government programs, the rising cost of living, limited access to affordable grocery stores, high rates of unemployment and a lack of education about how to budget, eat healthy and maintain employment. Proposed solutions include an increase in government programs, affordable stores, employment and education, coupled with a strengthened community.*

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## Introduction

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Although we live in a land of plenty, our society is still plagued by innumerable issues and inequalities. Access to healthy and affordable food is one such issue, as many American residents encounter the daily struggle to put food on the table. This problem is complicated and diverse, and found in many sectors of our society. Washington, DC, is one specific example where many residents experience barriers to healthy and affordable food, a place where the inequalities of poverty and food insecurity stand in stark contrast to the political power of Capitol Hill.

During the recent economic downturn, the problem of hunger has become even greater. In 2008, for instance, 14.6 percent of American households experienced food insecurity.<sup>1</sup> This can be defined as the limited or uncertain availability of adequate and safe foods, or the limited or uncertain ability to acquire suitable foods in socially acceptable ways.<sup>2</sup> The statistics of 2008 marks a peak in food insecurity since 1995, when surveys were first conducted. In Washington, DC, 12.4 percent of the population experiences food insecurity, with 4.2 percent experiencing very low food security.

Food insecurity is caused by a wide range of factors, generally as an effect of poverty. Barriers may include a paucity of local stores in rural regions and metropolitan food deserts, the high cost of living—including food and transportation to stores, limited income from employment or government assistance programs, time constraints to both shop for groceries and prepare meals, low demand in various regions for healthy food, limited access to farmer's markets and community supported agriculture, among many other issues.<sup>3</sup>

What do these barriers look like in lived experience? Often in identifying problems such as food insecurity, a wide range of data is gathered in formats that may lose the personal side of poverty and hunger. In an effort to record a few personal experiences of food insecurity, residents of Washington, DC, were interviewed on their perspective of hunger in their community. One can say that the true experts at understanding the problem of hunger are those who see it on a regular basis, and this report is an endeavor to share the voices of those who can provide insight into the lived experience of hunger.

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<sup>1</sup> Nord, Mark. "Household Food Security in the United States, 2008." Economic Research Service: United States Department of Agriculture, November 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Alamo, Katherine. "Food Insecurity in the United States, an Overview." *Topics in Clinical Nutrition*. 20.4 (2005): 281-298.

<sup>3</sup> Conroy, Dana and Shana McDavis-Conway. *Healthy Food, Healthy Communities: An Assessment and Scorecard of Community Food Security in the District of Columbia*. Washington, DC: DC Hunger Solutions, Food Research and Action Center, 2006.

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## Methodology

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### *Instrument for Measurement*

In order to gain qualitative data on the problem of hunger from the perspective of the community, the specific means of gathering information for this project was through interviews. The interviews ranged from 30 minutes to 1 hour, conducted in December of 2009 and January of 2010 at Bread for the City, a non-profit organization dedicated to providing vulnerable residents of Washington, DC, with comprehensive services in an air of dignity and respect.<sup>4</sup> Each respondent was asked specific questions about hunger within their household and community [Appendix A]. Respondents were asked if hunger was an issue in their neighborhood and how it manifested in daily life. They were also asked to share the barriers they personally or people in their community experience in getting healthy and affordable food. Additionally, they spoke of their interaction with government assistance programs and their ideas for how to alleviate hunger in their community. Interviews were recorded and transcribed to retain accuracy in representing the views of each individual.

### *Subject Selection*

The study includes ten residents of Washington, DC living primarily in the southeast and northwest sectors of the city [Appendix B]. Interviewees were from Bread for the City's clientele base, and interviews were conducted on voluntary response. Individuals enrolled in Bread for the City's cooking classes were contacted, as were interviewees from prior projects. A sign-up sheet was available at Bread for the City's Southeast Office for clients to participate as well. A few names have been altered to protect the privacy of individuals.

### *Limitations*

The purpose of this study is to illuminate specific issues that individuals and their community face within Washington, DC, and therefore the aim is not to provide an all-inclusive perspective of why food insecurity exists and what can be done to eliminate the problem. Rather, the goal of this study is to ascertain a more holistic and realistic perspective of the lived experience of hunger through the eyes of the community. Interviews were conducted with a specific set of questions in mind to gather information on the lived experience of food insecurity. However, conversations often deviated from the guidelines, which may prove to be a limitation in comparing the different perspectives of each respondent.

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<sup>4</sup> Mission and Vision. Bread For the City. Web. January 7, 2010.

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## Testimonials

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### *The Reality of Hunger*

Each testimony shared a unique perspective on hunger within the community, relating either personally to having limited access to healthy and affordable food or as a member of a community with various struggles related to food insecurity. The testimonies of these individuals demonstrate that food insecurity is a problem in Washington, DC, that needs to be addressed.<sup>5</sup> In describing hunger within her community, Valeria Ford, who lives in Northwest with her mother and currently receives Social Security Income, provided a personal definition of what it means to be hungry. She exclaimed, “Being hungry means—to me—not having access or being able to get the nourishment, the food... you want to eat all the time. Not being able to have the basics for the meals at the different meal times: breakfast, lunch and dinner.”

Valeria has noticed the lack of access within her own community, especially during this economic downturn. Mary, a retired woman who lives in Northeast, exemplified this thought, “I believe hunger is a very big issue. I believe that the issue of hunger is even more pronounced as we go through this particular economic time, and most especially in the communities that are impoverished and low-income.” A few of our clients identified their personal struggle with hunger during these challenging times as well. Della Jones, a young working mother living in Ward 8, shared her difficulties related to a lack of food:

Sometimes I measure out food and I try not to eat as much so it can last me a month, and save some for the next month... It’s really a struggle to fight hunger. Every day I’m fighting hunger. Pushing myself to eat less, because it’s hard... I try to eat smaller portions, try to save. I want to eat it all, but I need to save some for the next time and especially for my son.

Gwyneth Honesty, a woman residing in Southeast who resigned her position in childcare to take care of her ailing husband, related the difficulties of providing for her family,

We try to budget the food the best we can, but we have a cat, a dog, four children, and eight grandkids and my husband is sick and I’m a diabetic. So I try to budget my money the best I can. That's how I survive. I can't get everything I want. Half the time I put

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<sup>5</sup> “Food Hardship: A Closer Look at Hunger.” The Food Research and Action Center. Jan 2010. Web. 26 Jan 2010. The District of Columbia is ranked 15<sup>th</sup> for the highest rate of food hardship in the nation in 2009, at 20.8 percent.

something on the counter, I have to put it back, because I don't have enough money to get it.

Wanda Ford, a strong-willed woman in her mid-40's with three children, two of whom she adopted in 2000, described the difficulty of making ends meet:

With the way things are now with my finances, I can't go shopping for clothing or food, because all of my money is wrapped up in paying for my housing; I have no money left over. I run short every month. I had to take from Paul to give to Peter. Every month I have to juggle the cards.

Using very similar language, Mary described how she hears about people struggling to make ends meet, "You listen to them juggle, 'am I going to get a prescription, am I going to pay the rent, the gas, the telephone... or am I going to put food on the table?' For anyone who's concerned about hunger, you can go just about any place in our city and see that it does exist." If one were to look and listen, it would unfortunately become evident that many people in Washington DC experience food insecurity.

From these testimonies, it is evident that hunger is indeed an issue in our country and within the nation's capital. As Della noted, 'You see people not from the United States say, 'Wow, people are hungry over there?' They're not expecting that. How can you help me if you won't even help your own people?' She described the spectrum of hunger, from starvation in certain regions of the world to the insecurities of an empty pantry in our own, "There are places where people are starving, and when they're out, they're out... But definitely, I see that hunger at a level is here." She also expressed frustration that there is no *good* reason for why hunger exists in our land of plenty. But the reasons are many for *why* it exists.

#### *The Problem of Hunger: Why it Exists and What Can Be Done*

The testimonies from Bread for the City's clients demonstrate that the complex network of problems that cause food insecurity in America boils down to a lack of financial and social supports. Doline Johnson, a middle-aged woman living on Supplemental Security Income and currently unemployed, expressed her deep concern, "The finances keep you from buying all the food that you need. I'm talking, to keep our shelves stocked normally." Without enough income to get by, food is often the first to be cut in spending. For instance, Della mentioned in her interview that the neighborhood where she lives is impoverished, "In Ward 8, the population of people is low income. So if you are low income, sometimes you really can't afford certain things." And oftentimes these certain things are food for a balanced diet.

Respondents shared their thoughts on what causes food insecurity: a wide network of often interconnected individual problems and greater societal issues. In conversations with interviewees, each individual had a different lived experience and understanding of food insecurity, yet there were often many similarities between each situation. When asked what they viewed as the biggest barriers to

attaining healthy and affordable food in the District of Columbia, interviewees provided a variety of answers that fall into five main categories:

1. Inadequate assistance from government programs
2. The rising cost of living
3. Limited access to affordable grocery stores
4. High rates of unemployment and underemployment
5. Lack of education about how to budget, eat healthy and maintain employment

Respondents described how the above issues affect their personal lives or those of others around them. They provided reasoning for why these specific struggles exist in our modern American society and offered proposals to alleviate these problems.

### *1. Inadequate Assistance from Government Programs*

Many of the interviewees identified that they have difficulty with food security because they live on a fixed income that does not provide adequate financial support. Governmental assistance programs, such as Supplemental Security Income for disability, Unemployment Income, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as food stamps) and adoption subsidies provide support, but often not enough to meet the basic needs of each individual. Additionally, the process of applying for the programs and maintaining eligibility is often very difficult.

Valeria recounted that she is on food stamps, which support her immensely. However, she described that the process to apply for and receive food stamps was difficult. “It’s tough initially, because you don’t know what you have to bring. It’s a process to go through.” Wanda also mentioned that it took her a number of years to finally be accepted for food stamps, although she had been eligible when she first applied.

I just recently started getting food stamps, because I was told I couldn’t get food stamps because my kids were adopted. But the social worker who handled the case broke it down for me, and no one really managed to bother with my case because there was so much work to do. So all these years I wasn’t getting food stamps when I could have gotten them.

When the process to obtain food stamps is as difficult and onerous as it has been, it often becomes a burden to apply. With the recent economic downturn, the Income Maintenance Administration—a branch of the DC Government that determines applicant eligibility for federal programs<sup>6</sup>—has been overworked and understaffed as they process high volumes of applications, causing extremely long wait times. Valeria described this situation personally, “I applied for SSI, and right now I’m just getting interim disability. It’s not the full SSI, so it doesn’t help out.” It is difficult to wait for support in a time when it is

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<sup>6</sup> Income Maintenance. *Department of Human Services*. Web. 6 Jan 2011.

really needed.<sup>7</sup> In the time of most need, it has been difficult to attain the financial support necessary for many people to bring food to the table.

In addition to the difficulties of applying for various programs, a number of interviewees described their struggle to provide for all of their basic needs within a fixed income. Michael Mack, a middle-aged man who receives SSI, expressed his disillusionment with financial support, "It's a big problem getting food in DC. So, financially, the government is really not giving the funds for the people in need. That is why we can't have food on our tables." Doline exclaimed that she works hard to spread the funds that she receives over her various needs, but it does not cover her living expenses. With concern, she expressed, "I'm on disability, so my income is fixed. So I have to really budget. Even when I budget, it's still not enough." Wanda said that although she is able to seek employment, she remains on a fixed income in order to be available for her children, "I get an adoption subsidy for the two children that I adopted. They're special needs children, so it's hard for me to get work because they need around the clock help." For those like Wanda and Gwyneth who can potentially seek employment, they are the primary caretakers for family members and therefore have home obligations that should provide adequate compensation. Gwyneth described that even with the support of three governmental programs, paying the bills *and* having sufficient funds to put food on the table is tough:

I get a little bit with food stamps. My husband's disabled, and they don't give you much. Because I resigned to help my husband, I receive one little unemployment check, which is nice. But it doesn't cover the bills. Once I pay one bill, another bill slaps me in the face and it's so high again.

In response to the struggle to pay bills and purchase food, Mary mentioned the limitations of fixed income programs such as unemployment compensation, "There are many people that are concerned about... once they get the unemployment check and divide it up, how much of it is really going to go for food, sitting there knowing that they're hungry." She herself mentioned the challenge of stretching her fixed income as a retired woman, "There are times when I run out." It is difficult to keep an abundance of food in the budget when there are so many other economic demands to meet, and it should not be this way.<sup>8</sup>

As a potential solution to alleviate food insecurity, interview respondents described how an increase in the assistance programs provided by the government would provide a leg up. Carmen McCall mentioned how she believes that this would help her community,

If you expect a person to go forward, you have to put things out there for them to be able to grab onto... And some people are just going to take advantage. But then there

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<sup>7</sup> Craig, Tim. "Frustration among poor D.C. residents grows at understaffed assistance center." *Washington Post* 19 Jan 2010. Web. 22 Jan 2010.

Craig stated, "Service centers that process welfare and other aid applications in the District are understaffed and overwhelmed with needy residents, forcing some to essentially camp out for days to try to get assistance."

<sup>8</sup> Deparle, Jason. "Living on Nothing but Food Stamps." *The New York Times*. 2 Jan 2010. Web. 13 Jan 2010.



are the people that really need help, but they don't want help. And then there are twice as many that want to be helped. And I think it's important to help them.

Carmen noted that there will always be people who take advantage of the government's safety net and others who refuse to make use of it, but overall the assistance is much needed. Those who really do need the support should not be denied because of a few who abuse the system. Valeria mentioned that with the rising cost of living, assistance from government programs should match these changes, "With the cost of living increasing, I think our benefits should increase. We stay in the same level that we're getting, but things are going up—food, cost of living, [etcetera], and we need to add more to our stipends for living. I think that would help a lot." People who live off of fixed income programs cannot be expected to be food secure if their expenses continue to rise with little to no increase in their income.

## *2. The Rising Cost of Living*

As Valeria explained, the cost of living in our nation has continued to rise without an equivalent rise in income for many people who are employed, seeking work or out of the workforce. Food budgets are often slashed as people divert funds to pay bills and daily expenses. Valeria expressed her disappointment with the current economic situation,

It's sad that we live in the capital of the United States and we are like this... I feel that people here in Washington, DC, are hungry and don't have enough food because of the financial situation—the economy, and the cost of living has gone up. We don't have enough funds, and we don't have access to the nutrients and the basic essentials that we need to survive. We're at a loss. If we got some more income—and more jobs to provide more income—then we could get the money we could use to buy the food that we need, the nutrients that we need.

From personal experience, Valeria described how she has been affected by the rise in the cost of living, and her hopes that increases in both government funding and employment could help a wide variety of people to be more financially stable and therefore more food secure.

Michael spoke of his financial situation and the various ways that his money is chipped away, leaving little for food, "Your rent goes up, taxes goes up... Living in DC, they keep going up. And when we have fewer finances, it runs back into the food... And some of the food that really we need costs an arm and a leg." Doline—as with most of the interviewees—pointed out that the cost of merely surviving in the United States in this day and age cause poverty and food insecurity. She exclaimed indignantly, "I've got my gas, electric, water, transportation, daycare, taking care of my grandbabies off and on. But with \$100 a month, that's not enough. And food costs." In a similar situation, Della explained that the financial situation for many people is not fair, as they shrink their personal budgets to adjust for inflation: "Some people are working really hard, and they still struggle with hunger. Some people get just enough to pay the bills, and not enough for food. Why'd that happen? Because we've got rent, and everything is going up, but your pay... stays the same."

Wanda, as well, objected to the rising cost of living, “How can you have the right amount of money to go out and get food if your housing and utilities are very expensive?” And on top of that, she has watched the prices increase in stores, “The prices are going up... so every time you go for food you get less and less. Some things that I used to buy, I couldn’t buy because it was higher, so I had to change it.” Wanda has had to adjust her eating habits in order to shop more efficiently. And she has seen how every time she goes to the store, her food stamps can buy less and less, as everything but her income increase.

As people’s food budgets shrink, their options wither as well. Wanda described that she now eats the “same-old, same-old” every day because it’s what’s affordable for her and her family. Often times, this “same-old” food is what comes cheap, not what is healthy. Etta Mabry, a retired woman living in Northwest who is legally blind, was in concordance with Wanda’s thought, “I don’t have that much money. It’s hard to buy some foods, like whole grain bread. That’s two or three dollars, for seven-grain bread. But sometimes you can’t buy what you want. It costs more to eat healthy.” When one is restricted by a budget, priorities are balanced. In the fight between economic options and healthy foods, the more affordable option will often win.

Della’s point of view is that if eating healthy were affordable, than people would be much more willing to do so. In reality, however, she recognizes that many people in her community don’t have the finances to shop for a healthy lifestyle. “If a person can afford to eat healthy, I believe that they will eat healthy. It’s more of an incentive to eat healthy if you have money and to not eat healthy if you don’t.” Personally, Della described that she tries to purchase healthier food for her and her son, but oftentimes it’s not an option, “I try not to get him to go to the carry outs and stuff like that, but that’s when I can afford it. It should not be that way. Food should cost the same, not twice as much because it’s healthy.” When healthy food is out of reach, it becomes obvious why obesity and health complications are issues in Washington, DC. Gwyneth’s thoughts on healthy foods were very similar to that of Della, expressing her frustration with prices,

You have to go to the store and buy what is healthy for you, and I can't afford it, half the time. I try to buy the whole grain wheat, the real cranberry juice, but I can't get all that stuff, because it's expensive for me. I would love to have it, because it's good for your body, it's healthy and it's nutritious. But, frankly, I can't afford it. So I do what I can do... it's hard to eat healthy when you can't supply for it.

Eating healthy is not always a choice, as Della pointed out. The food has to be affordable and within your neighborhood, which is generally not the case for many residents of the District of Columbia.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> District of Columbia Department of Health. “Chart 8. Health Risk Behaviors, Ward 8.” *Ward 8 – Profile of Health and Socio-Economic Indicators*. Department of Health: Center for Policy, Planning and Epidemiology, State Center for Health Statistics. Web. 26 Jan 2010.

In 2004, 38.6 percent of the population in Ward 8 was diagnosed as obese, compared to 22.5 percent for the District of Columbia.

### 3. Limited Access to Affordable Grocery Stores

As Della mentioned, healthy food is often expensive, and it is also hard to come by in her neighborhood. Almost all of the interview respondents relayed the difficulties that they or other community members experience in getting to stores to buy healthy and affordable food. Sections of Wards 7 and 8, where seven of the interviewees live, have been termed *food deserts*, areas—rural or urban—that have a shortage of affordable stores that carry healthy foods.<sup>10</sup> There are only two supermarkets that serve the area of River East, which include a population of 139,620.<sup>11</sup> A wide range of corner stores, take-outs, liquor stores and fast food restaurants line various major streets in the area, but interviewees griped that these stores are often expensive, have limited merchandise and mainly carry unhealthy foods. Della described this situation in her neighborhood,

When I go outside of my community, there's a lot more food. They don't sell [healthy food] at the markets. So I have to go out, and that's more money I'm spending to be healthy. I have to go outside my community to live a healthy life. That's not fair. I feel like for the low-income section, markets are not healthy; the markets play a part of the obesity.

Another resident of River East, Sue Warren, a retired woman who now helps her daughter with a daycare program, recognized this problem as well, “One thing East of the River that they need to cut back on is the fast food and the liquor store. You have no problem finding something to drink and something to eat that's full of grease.” She noted that it's no wonder why obesity is problematic in her community if nearby stores sell products that exacerbate diabetes and heart complications.<sup>12</sup>

When asked about the options for shopping, a majority of the respondents in expressed disappointment with the availability of stores. Michael described with displeasure that “We're in a community where the stores aren't nearby. We have the corner stores to get what you need, but you pay. The closest stores are high.” Shopping at corner stores is often very expensive. The alternative, however, is not convenient. Carmen explained, “You have the Safeway at the top of the hill and the Giant on Alabama Avenue, but if you don't use those stores, then you have to get on a bus or car and go to Eastover in Maryland. So somewhere in between there should be some stores here, on this side.” It is often very difficult to get to the stores that are affordable, as Carmen continued with frustration:

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<sup>10</sup> Ver Ploeg, Michelle, ed. *Access to Affordable and Nutritious Food: Measuring and Understanding Food Deserts and Their Consequences*. Economic Research Service: United States Department of Agriculture, June 2009.

<sup>11</sup> “Community Conversation in Benning Ridge/Ft. Dupont Park.” Targeted Neighborhoods Community Conversations. 22 Jan 2009.

<sup>12</sup> Wiggins, Ovetta. “Pr. George's leader wants to curb county's fast-food eateries.” *Washington Post* 26 January 2010. Web. 26 Jan 2010.

The article notes the link between the commonality of fast food restaurants and obesity in Prince George's County. The Coalition of Central Prince George's Community Organizations is working in a region nearby to the District of Columbia to limit the influx of fast food restaurants and promote the installment of healthier stores.

I don't have a car, you see the difference? I always have to ride the bus everywhere I go. Now, with Costco, you couldn't do that. You can take the subway to get to the store, and you buy a lot of stuff, you've got to lug it on the subway or bus. And I really don't understand why there's no store on this side.

Getting to the store is very difficult for many people living in food deserts in the District, which increases food insecurity as they must work their schedules around opportunities to shop. As Michael noted, "When they got the buses, they didn't look at who's going to use them. They didn't look at the carts that people are going to be carrying." Public transportation becomes cumbersome to use when one is carrying groceries home.

Valeria illustrated another major challenge for DC residents: public transportation often becomes expensive when relied upon for regular use. "Having the means to get food is another thing. If you don't have the money to get something, you don't have the money to get there to get it—access." Gwyneth also lamented this fact, expressing her deep concern that, "The fare is so high now." Wanda noted that in addition to financial costs, time is also an issue. If she does not get a ride from friends, to get to the affordable stores outside of the District of Columbia, "I have to catch 3 buses. The majority of the affordable stores are out of your transportation reach, like Maryland. It's very hard to get there. First of all, if you're on a fixed income, how would you get all the way out to Maryland if you don't have the proper transportation?" Not only does Wanda have to think about carrying home goods for her and her three children, but she also has to keep the cost of transportation to stores in mind as she plans her budget.

To further compound this situation posed by public transportation, many people with disabilities find public transportation especially difficult to use. Instead, many must rely on the transportation of family members and acquaintances. For instance, Etta articulated,

A lot of people who are blind can't get to the store, so they have to have someone take them. I have to rely on other people. The only way for me to get my food is for my neighbor to go for me. If I have someone to take me to the store, I don't know my way around. I need them to come with me and I can ask them, "What's on this side? What's on that side?" So my freezer is empty and the fridge is empty.

Shopping becomes a major inconvenience when Etta must rely on the generosity of neighbors or the unpredictability of the Metro Access transportation that she has tried to use with little success. For Mary, as well, it is not easy to get to the store while using a cane. She illustrated, "In the neighborhood that I live in, stores are not accessible." She used to "Walk to the Giant in Maryland, and that's a half-hour walk. But now I have to use public transportation to go to the store and come back." And for her, this is often across the border in Maryland, or a metro ride to a supermarket downtown.

As these anecdotes relate, many respondents questioned why there were so few supermarkets and affordable stores in their neighborhoods. As a potential solution, bringing in these businesses is high on the list for neighborhood change, especially for Gwyneth, who passionately expressed:

Some people come out of their houses and there's a Safeway, there's a Giant. We don't have that here. We have to take the bus. Why don't we have that in our neighborhood? I'm also diabetic. I love to get outside, but sometimes my body doesn't allow it. So what about when I want to go to Safeway or Giant, why can't there be someplace on the corner where I can go? The needy people can't get around too far, who don't drive or anything and have to use public transportation. Why can't they have someplace close to them? Why do we always have to go out to another neighborhood just to get what we need?

Food deserts in Washington, DC, hinder many residents' options to choose healthy and affordable food. As Gwyneth demonstrated, this is intrinsically unfair, and changes should be made to make purchasing food more convenient instead of burdensome.

#### *4. High Rates of Unemployment and Underemployment*

In addition to the lack of supermarkets in various parts of Washington, DC, there is a major job shortage. Specific to Ward 8, for example, the unemployment rate is at 28.3 percent.<sup>13</sup> Valeria stated this point quite clearly, "People are out of work, unemployed." Only Della noted that she had a job, and Sue and Mary are retired. All others mentioned being unemployed or out of the workforce due to disability or other obligations. For those seeking employment, it is a very difficult time to find income opportunities. Gwyneth described her challenges in seeking employment,

I used to teach in school, and then I went home to take care of my disabled husband. He's much better now, and so I'm seeking employment at a rough time. It's the economy right now; it's really a big risk, because you can't find jobs... You don't have enough money to go to the store and buy anything, because you don't have a source of income.

Gwyneth's story is like that of many people in the District of Columbia. She is a woman with experience, but few employers are hiring. The resulting unemployment puts her in a difficult situation as she tries to cover bills and purchase the food that her family needs. To her, this creates a daily struggle. Doline is seeking employment as well, in hopes to alleviate her struggles with an increase in income,

I'd like to have a part time job, but I don't want them to mess with my Social Security. Social Security gives you so much money you can make, but it's not enough. If you make

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<sup>13</sup> Editorial. "The shortfall in legal aid demands help from area lawyers." *Washington Post* 28 Dec 2010. Web. 26 Jan 2010.

a little extra money, they go overboard, and your Social Security check goes down. Or you lose it. I'd like to have a little part-time job. Now, I'm disabled, but I [could do] something that makes me sit down at the desk and talk to someone on the phone.

A wide range of people would choose to work if they knew that their benefits would not shrink or disappear. As mentioned above by a majority of the interviewees, government programs do not provide sufficient income, nor does solely having a minimum-wage or part-time job. Provision through *both* employment and assistance programs would give many people the opportunity to purchase the foods to keep hunger and food insecurity at bay. Carmen underlined this fact, "People who've lost their jobs or can't afford a lot of food have assistance, but it's not adequate income to make it through for the whole month." Many people need this combination of government assistance and employment in order to rise above the daily struggle with limited funds.

Despite the scarcity of employment, however, a number of interviewees are hopeful about the future, and provided suggestions to support the local economy. Gwyneth adamantly expressed, "They need more work and more programs for those who are uneducated and need education. They need programs that help them so than they can get ahead in life, so they can get good paying jobs. I want a good paying job."<sup>14</sup>

In line with Gwyneth's comment, Michael illustrated the vital link that could support his neighborhood in River East. He believes that incoming businesses have the potential to provide employment as well as access to food and other needed commodities, "In Ward 8, they were talking about jobs and bringing business in so they could help the people. It's not just bringing business in... you've got to offer jobs. People can't pay the bills, can't get food, because they need the jobs." Michael made a good point that if contractors, government agencies, and the community invested in business in his area, employment would most likely rise as a result. He is hopeful that potential Homeland Security funds can help with this development. And the resulting growth will provide more income for households to buy healthy and affordable food.

##### *5. Lack of Education about How to Budget, Eat Healthy, and Maintain Employment*

In addition to the high rate of unemployment in the city, the final factor that most of the interviewees touched upon as a cause or inflammatory factor of food insecurity was a lack of education. They identified three main educational areas that could improve food insecurity; these included instruction on how to budget one's finances, prepare healthy food options and maintain employment during the economic recession. Interviewees recognized that for a wide range of people, further education in these areas would help provide financial stability and health. Often, lack of education or a desire to learn about how to eat healthy, budget and maintain jobs may be stereotyped as the main problem for why

<sup>14</sup> "Capital Area Food Bank at 30: History, Hunger, and Hope; a Policy Forum at the Washington Post." *Capital Area Food Bank*. 15 January 2010.

Mark Winne described the importance of advocating for an increased minimum wage that equates to a living wage as a means to decrease the poverty rate in our nation and therefore increase food security.

low-income populations are in poverty and food secure. However, as these testimonies note, many other societal factors contribute to food insecurity, and individual shortcomings are only small factors at play in a greater network of problems that people experience.

Sue spoke of personal changes in her community. She was emphatic that opportunities for people—especially the younger generation—to learn about how to better budget their finances would help many families to make ends meet. She articulated, “It’s a matter of being educated on stretching the dollars.” Carmen also had a similar point, “If you educate and teach people how to manage their money—what’s a good buy versus what they buy—a lot of people will progress.” Classes for adults and increased emphasis in school for youth would provide people with more of an understanding of how to utilize funds to cover the bases, especially in regards to purchasing food.

As well as education about financial planning, interviewees emphasized instruction about eating healthy in the community. Although healthy food is not very accessible to many low income residents of the District of Columbia (supply is low), an increase in demand could potentially help provide incentive for store owners to provide healthy options at an affordable rate. Carmen relayed her notion that,

Even people who are on subsidized income or welfare need to be trained, because they eat a lot of carry-out and they stock up on the wrong things. People just need to be more educated, and people need to take more classes like the ones [Bread for the City] gives.

Adults can be instructed in how to shop for and prepare healthier items through classes provided by local establishments. Additionally, Sue mentioned the importance of health instruction in the school system, “It starts in the schools with our kids. If you teach them at an early age, ‘It’s ok to eat this *this* way and it tastes good,’ then that’s good. And then they come home and they say, ‘That’s good.’ And they may eat some McDonalds but not that much. They’ll want to eat the healthy food.” Teaching children how to eat healthy at an early age will inform their food choices as well as those of their parents, thus providing a strong foundation to direct the local community to make healthy choices when shopping for and preparing food. Mary related this fact as well, “We need to do more to dissuade people from believing the [McDonalds] dollar menu is good for our health, or Burger King... There needs to be more at the elementary school, at the pre-K, middle school and high school levels.” She has hope, however, that this can happen, as she recently overheard a conversation between youth about a potential trip to McDonalds. One individual responded, “That’s high fat, high salt and high cholesterol. You don’t want to eat that.” Education about healthy living has increased, and Mary would like to see it continue to grow.

Mary’s emphasis on education does not stop solely with the community members, but also with those selling food. She hopes that vendors in corner stores can also learn the importance of their role in promoting health by stocking nutritious items on their shelves.

I believe that [there should be] more concentrated efforts to educate some of the vendors in our community so that they understand that we now have been educated and enlightened. We know that Oodles of Noodles is not what we should have, and they should offer some fresh greens, some potatoes and some tomatoes, instead of rows and rows of carbohydrates, potato chips, Doritos and Oodles of Noodles. Educate the vendors on what types of food are healthy for us. The government and the vendor should work together so that the vendors don't have to feel like they can't make any money. If the vendors and the city work together, we'd have the opportunities to make the right choices.

In an effort to change our overall community view on how to eat healthy, Mary made the critical remark that local stores must also be part of this transition. Education and funds should be provided to make these changes possible and permanent.<sup>15</sup>

Thirdly, many respondents noted the importance of education in terms of job preparation with both children and adults, as with healthy eating. Such training could potentially help adults who need assistance in job preparation get back on their feet and help children be more equipped for the transition into the workforce as young adults. Michael asked a rhetorical question, "When I'm not doing anything I can't learn things, I can't mature. I can't grow like that. So if I can't pick up work... then how can I mature?" He believes that maturation towards employment readiness starts with the children, and we need to do a better job of preparing students for employment while in school. Michael continued, "When I go to school, I can learn how to get a job, be wise and be more responsible. Then I can make decisions and work with different types of people." Stronger programs for professional development in our education systems can support individuals when stepping into the work force.

In regards to assistance for adults, Valeria mentioned, "I would like to see some workshops." On a similar note, Gwyneth described, "There are jobs out here, but maybe not in your profession. So there should be more classes... [Employers] tell us they need experience. They need places where they can go to get experience, doing classes in two or three weeks." If we do so, Gwyneth is hopeful that it would "Help the people survive... I'm not saying you're going to have everything you want, but at least what you need to survive on—food, shelter and clothing." Stronger programs to support the unemployed and underemployed prepare for specific job fields can help people transition into the professional workforce.

### *Additional Solutions*

Along with these five main categories that interviewees identified as factors that cause hunger and suggestions for change, a few respondents described a variety of supplemental solutions that could

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<sup>15</sup>Healthy Corner Store Program. DC Hunger Solutions. Web. 26 Jan 2010.

DC Hunger Solutions has hosted a DC Healthy Corner Store Program in a number of stores in Wards 7 and 8, working with vendors and local farmers to stock fresh and affordable produce.



provide critical results as well. Such solutions included gardening, visiting farmers' markets and community organizing to create a more supportive city.

Sue's deck is lined with pots, where she has successfully grown a wide range of produce, from tomatoes to cabbage. She has greatly enjoyed the experience, and thinks that it could be useful to many other people in supporting food security. She proudly said, "It's a big money saver. And it's exercise and educational, because you put those seeds in the pot or in the ground and you don't know what's coming... But it gives you a good feeling to know that you have something at your table that you had a hand in growing. It's rewarding to have your own garden." Gardening is not only cost-effective, but also educational and nutritious.<sup>16</sup> For those who are unemployed or retired, a little time spent gardening at a neighborhood plot or in a pot at home could provide an enriching experience.

Along with gardening, both Mary and Carmen expressed their enthusiasm over the rise in farmers' markets in Washington, DC. With increased education on healthy eating, farmers' markets can provide the opportunity to invest in local business and provide community members with healthy options. Mary related that she receives economic incentives to shop at farmers' markets, "They give me coupons when I go pick up supplemental food distribution to use at the farmers' markets. And I thought it was delightful. It was rather inexpensive and affordable." Carmen also related a positive experience, "If you do things in moderation, they're fairly affordable. After a while, you get acclimated and you learn the people, and most of the time they'll give you a good deal just to keep you coming." Both women have enjoyed shopping at farmers' markets, and have hope that others can begin to utilize this resource as well. Providing coupons such as those that Mary receives and increasing the quantity of markets that accept food stamps can help to make them more accessible to low-income populations.<sup>17</sup>

In addition to the enrichment of gardening, community organizing can also reduce food insecurity, through strengthened solidarity and active involvement. Della pointed out that we need to build community by sharing, "We need to stop being greedy. If you already have something, give it to the next person who doesn't have it. And if we adjust the selfishness, then I think there won't be any hunger here in America. Take it little by little, and spread it out, and I believe that'll solve hunger." If we come together and share our resources as a national community, Della believes that her local community will be affected in a way that will reduce and potentially even eliminate food insecurity. Wanda also wants to see the different sectors of our society come together, so that our policy makers can understand the real need. She exclaimed, "Maybe if the politicians went out in the community, they can see what's really going on and what we as citizens really need, they would understand." Our society can do more to work together in bringing about change.

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<sup>16</sup> Home Page. *Common Good City Farm*. Benton Publishing. Web. 26 Jan 2010.

A number of local community gardens exist with the aims that include increasing food security, education, and community building.

<sup>17</sup>EBT/WIC Programs. FRESHFARM Markets. Web. 26 Jan 2010.

The FRESHFARM Markets non-profit works to provide increased access to farmer's markets for low-income households.

In addition to reducing our nation's greed, our national and local communities need to be willing to come together, share resources and stand up for our rights. In relation to this community change, Carmen noted, "I think it's important for people to be involved in the community. People can make a difference. Because we need help right now." Similarly, Michael was adamant about the importance of community organizing,

If you don't stand up for things you need to stand up for, these things that we need close down. And if you look at the child that comes along, what does he have? You need to meet with the DC government, and get the wards to talk. We need to get the actual results of all the problems in the community... As our father's fathers stood up and our mothers stood up, [we need to stand up] for the crisis that we're going through right now.

Michael noted that there must be a desire in his neighborhood to bring about the changes that people wish to see, in order to ensure that the economic situation does change. And also to ensure that people can have enough money to put food on the table.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Ending Childhood Hunger by 2015: The Essential Strategies for Achieving the President's Goal. Food Research and Action Center. July 1 2009. Web. 26 Jan 2010.

For further information about how to end hunger—specifically childhood hunger—FRAC offers a strong resource.

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## Conclusion

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Each individual provided a unique and important window into the reality of food insecurity—the obstacles that people face on a daily basis in obtaining healthy and affordable food and the possibilities to change these challenges. Collectively, respondents noted that government aid is insufficient and does not match the cost of living that continues to rise. Local supermarkets are in short supply in many neighborhoods, and people must often travel long distances on public transportation or rely on acquaintances in order to reach locations where they can purchase affordable groceries. Additionally, the high rate of unemployment makes it difficult for respondents to find jobs that would reduce the pressure of living on a limited income. Along with the shortage of jobs is a lack of education in the community about how to budget one's expenses, prepare and eat healthy meals and seek employment in today's economic crisis. Each respondent posed potential solutions, such as increasing government assistance and installing grocery stores, strengthening the job market and creating more educational opportunities. Interviewees also noted the importance of the local food movement, such as cultivating gardens and visiting farmers' markets, as part of the equation to end hunger. Along with these changes we must develop a desire to converge on the issue of hunger and call for change.

This report documents the voices of those who know hunger, who have observed its effects in their lives and within the lives of their communities and who want to see these changes come about. Della, a woman who understands hunger on a daily basis—who wishes to see changes in her community, in our country and globally—recognizes that within our nation, “We have enough finances... to help end hunger.” We need to let our voices out to pressure our society to make these changes happen, to use our resources in a way that ensures that all people have access to the basic right of healthy and affordable food. This report is one among many ways that we lift up our voices, lifted up not as a plea but as a demand for our society to collectively end hunger.

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## Appendix A

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### *Interview Questions*

- Is hunger an issue in your community? Is eating healthy an issue? How?
- What does it mean to be “hungry?” Have you heard the term “Food insecure?” “Food desert?” If so, what do they mean to you? If not, what do you think they mean?
- What barriers are there for getting the food that you want and need?
  - Cost, transportation (distance, public/private transit), supply in stores, time, accessibility, kitchen supplies, disability, etc.
  - Why do you think these barriers exist?
- How does this affect your life? Your family? Your community?
- How far do you go to get groceries?
- What foods do the stores have? What don’t they have?
- What foods do you buy? Where?
- What do you usually cook? How? Do you have the time? The cooking appliances & utensils?
- Do the stores near you carry healthy foods? Are the healthy foods affordable?
- How do Food Stamps/SNAP, WIC, TANF/Welfare help? How don’t they help?
- Do you think other people in different parts of DC face these issues? Why/Why not?
- Do you think other people in different parts of the country face these issues? Why/Why not?
- How does Bread For the City help?
- What can we do to make food more accessible?
  - Our government? Bread For the City? Us as citizens and a community?

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## Appendix B

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*Below is a list of the interviewees involved in the creation of this report, in alphabetical order. Many thanks for the thoughtful contributions of these individuals.*

**Carmen McCall** – Carmen is a retired woman living in Ward 8, and a lifelong resident of the District of Columbia. She retired after 42 years working with children.

**Della Jones** – Della is a young working mother living in River East. She takes loving care of her son and has recently become involved in international efforts to raise money for the situation in Haiti.

**Doline Johnson** – Doline is a middle-aged woman living in River East who currently receives SSI. She is seeking employment in hopes to increase her income.

**Etta Mabry** – Etta is retired woman living in the Northwest region of Washington, DC. She has been legally blind for about twenty years, and currently lives in the house that she purchased as a young woman.

**Gwyneth Honesty** – Gwyneth resigned her position in education to take care of her ailing husband at home. She faces challenges in paying for her utilities in a house built with insulation in Anacostia.

**Mary** – Currently living in her home in Northeast DC, Mary is a woman living on a fixed income. She used to volunteer at a homeless center for women.

**Michael Mack** – A friend of Doline, Michael also receives SSI, as they both work together to make ends meet. He is hopeful to see change in his community, especially in regards to educational development.

**Sue Warren** – A retired woman residing in River East, Sue spends her days supporting her daughter's daycare program for infants and young children. She enjoys gardening and cooking for the children that she supports.

**Valeria Ford** – Living in Northwest with her mother, Valeria receives interim disability income while she waits for her paperwork to be filed. She enjoys attending cooking classes hosted by Bread For the City.

**Wanda Ford** – Wanda lives in Anacostia and supports her three children through food stamps and adoption subsidies as a single mother. She has opened her house on multiple occasions to other children and young women in her community who need a place to stay.