

Nutritional Insecurity

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Written by the Health Equity Council



Executive Statement

Nutritional insecurity in Bernalillo County is a critical public health issue that undermines the well-being of vulnerable populations, particularly children, seniors, and low-income families. This policy brief outlines targeted recommendations to improve access to nutrient-rich foods, ensure accountability in meal programs, and address systemic barriers perpetuating nutritional deficits across the county.

Background

Nutritional insecurity, distinct from food insecurity, refers to the inconsistent access to essential nutrients required for healthy physical, cognitive, and emotional development, rather than just sufficient caloric intake (CDC, 2024). In Bernalillo County, this issue is particularly pronounced among marginalized populations, including low-income households, seniors, and individuals residing in shelters. These challenges result in widespread deficiencies in critical nutrients such as calcium, iron, fiber, and vitamins A, D, and C, which are necessary for disease prevention, energy production, and overall well-being.

Systemic barriers exacerbate these nutritional deficits. Food deserts remain a significant issue, with the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) identifying over 20% of Bernalillo County's population as living in areas with limited access to supermarkets or farmers' markets. These residents often rely on convenience stores or fast-food outlets, which predominantly offer processed, high-calorie, and nutrient-poor foods. Economic disparities further compound the problem; low-income households frequently face financial constraints that limit their ability to purchase fresh produce, lean proteins, and whole grains. While programs like SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) and WIC (Women, Infants, and Children) provide some relief, benefits often fall short of covering the cost of consistently nutritious meals.

For individuals in shelters or congregate settings, nutritional insecurity is even more acute, as they often depend entirely on meal programs. These programs, including those at city-funded shelters like the Westside Emergency Housing Center (WEHC), lack standardized nutritional guidelines. Reports from community-based organizations highlight that the meals served may not provide adequate protein, fiber, or nutrient variety, raising concerns about the long-term health implications for residents who are completely reliant on these programs. Programs like the Whittier Food Hub model demonstrate the potential for schools to serve as centers for improved nutrition, offering culturally appropriate food preparation and meal kits directly to families. Similarly, community gardens and urban farms provide promising solutions for increasing access to fresh produce. However, these initiatives often struggle with sustainability due to a lack of long-term funding and coordinated volunteer efforts. Many gardens falter when key leaders depart, underscoring the need for consistent support from the city to ensure their success.

Addressing nutritional insecurity in Bernalillo County requires systemic changes, including policy improvements, enhanced meal program accountability, and expanded access to nutrient-dense foods. By prioritizing culturally relevant nutrition education, strengthening food assistance programs, and implementing sustainable community-based solutions, the county can significantly reduce the burden of diet-related chronic conditions and improve overall health outcomes.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Increase Access to Nutrient-Rich Foods. Establish mobile farmers' markets in underserved areas to provide fresh produce and culturally relevant food items. Partner with local food distributors to expand subsidies for nutrient-dense foods such as fruits, vegetables, lean proteins, and whole grains.

Recommendation 2: Expand Nutrition-Focused Education. Implement school-based nutrition programs that emphasize nutrient balance and the preparation of healthy meals. Collaborate with community leaders to deliver culturally relevant workshops focused on dietary improvements and meal planning.

Recommendation 3: Strengthen Support for Food Assistance Programs. Enhance SNAP and WIC benefits to include additional funding for nutrient-rich food purchases. Provide multilingual support and simplified processes to increase accessibility and engagement with these programs.

Recommendation 4: Invest in Community-Based Solutions. Support the creation of urban gardens and community farms to encourage local food production and accessibility. Leverage local nonprofits to implement initiatives targeting nutritional deficits through culturally appropriate approaches.

Recommendation 5: Advocate for Policy Change. Encourage policymakers to implement zoning laws that promote access to fresh and nutrient-dense foods in all neighborhoods. Incentivize grocery stores and restaurants to prioritize the availability of healthy and affordable options.

References:

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