



CALL TO ACTION:

# Strengthening Food Security in Texas Children and Seniors through Legislative Action

Rio Grande Valley Equal Voice Network Health Working Group

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**The views expressed in this White Paper are presented as a summary of the collective views of the members of the Equal Voice Health Working Group that conducted Results-Based Accountability (RBA) work sessions facilitated by Clear Impact in the summer of 2018.**

This White Paper is the result of a collective process of analysis and consensus building led by the Equal Voice Health Working Group. We present a menu of policy recommendations addressing child and senior food insecurity for consideration and action by our legislators to strengthen equitable access to nutritious food for vulnerable populations.

Food security is a multifaceted issue that requires long-term policy strategies and systems change. Policies that align local community efforts at the statewide level and address systemic barriers to food access are necessary to ensure all Texans have enough food to thrive across the life-span. Achieving zero hunger will require systems change driven by long-term legislative action supported through political will and sustained funding.

Current initiatives addressing food security operate under a fragmented model lacking a consistent system of co-investment and shared accountability among government agencies, non-profit organizations, faith-based entities, for-profit companies, and academia. In order to catalyze systems change for food security, state leadership should build on the Texas Early Childhood Systems Integration Group model, a pilot project of seven state agencies and divisions working together to identify, coordinate and implement cross-sector initiatives for young children and their families.[1]

To achieve a better return on investment of public resources, state agencies should measure impact at the state, regional, and local levels, and report annually to the Texas Legislature on their combined outcomes, and thus create a shared system of accountability. A standardized measurement tool needs to be adopted and implemented for the collection of local data, to tell the story of change and impact in our region and state, and hold all stakeholders accountable for the results."

To promote a longitudinal multi-agency approach to cross-issue funding, it will require the Texas Department of Agriculture (TDA), the Texas Education Agency (TEA), the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC), the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS), the Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) and the Department of State Health Services (DSHS) to align their actions and resources at the state level. It will also allow these state agencies to support the efforts of non-government stakeholders in each region to measure and report back to their local community, to their funders, and to the state, on their performance measures regarding their direct services to their clients.

As the saying goes, "It takes a village" to address a complex social issue like food insecurity in children and seniors, but it also takes a sustainable system of "collective impact" to ensure a long-term focus on measuring results and holding all stakeholders accountable for outcomes.

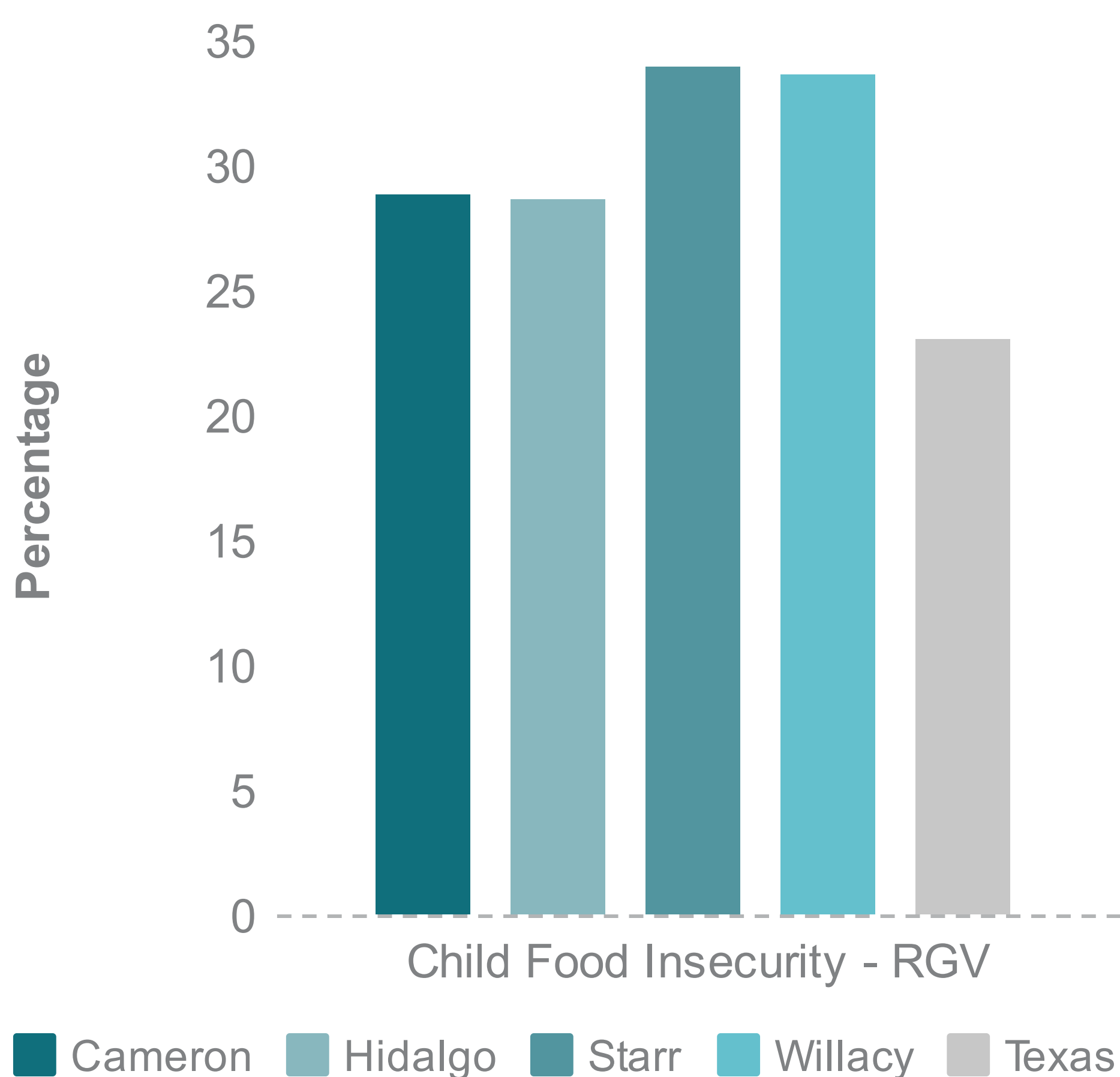
# FOOD SECURITY IN THE RIO GRANDE VALLEY

Food insecurity disproportionately affects children and seniors.[2] The Food Bank of the Rio Grande Valley (RGV) reports that 1 in 4 people are food insecure (25%) in our border region, meaning “they are challenged with either paying bills or skipping meals and/or buying less expensive, less [nutritious] foods to eat.”[3]



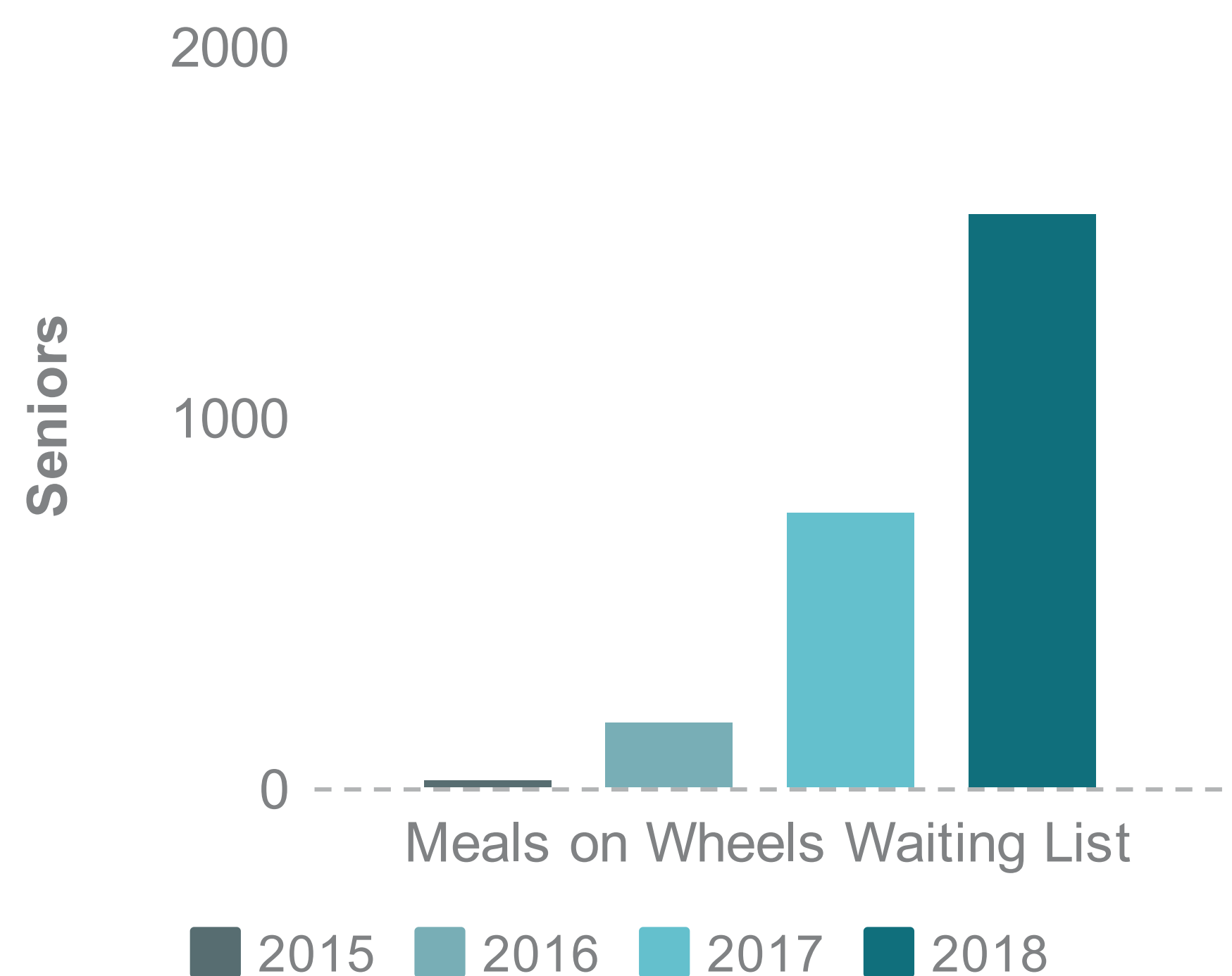
## Children

Across Texas, 23% of children are food insecure.[4] In the Rio Grande Valley this figure is higher: 28.8% in Cameron County, 28.6% in Hidalgo County, 33.9% in Starr County and 33.6% in Willacy County.[5] This accounts for 126,940 food insecure children across the Valley.



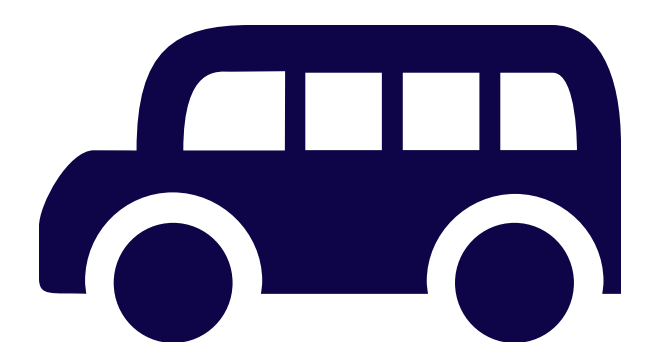
## Seniors

Across Texas, 11.3% of seniors experienced food insecurity over a three-year period (2014 to 2016).[6] In the Rio Grande Valley, Amigos del Valle serves seniors 3000 meals each day. After an uptick in partner referrals, Amigos del Valle, Inc. reported an increase in the Meals on Wheels waiting service list from 18 seniors in 2015 to 1,544 seniors as of September 2018.[7] In addition, 22% of clients served by the Food Bank of the RGV are over the age of 60. Participation in the food bank's senior feeding program nearly doubled from 5,365 seniors in 2016 to 9,317 in 2018.[8]

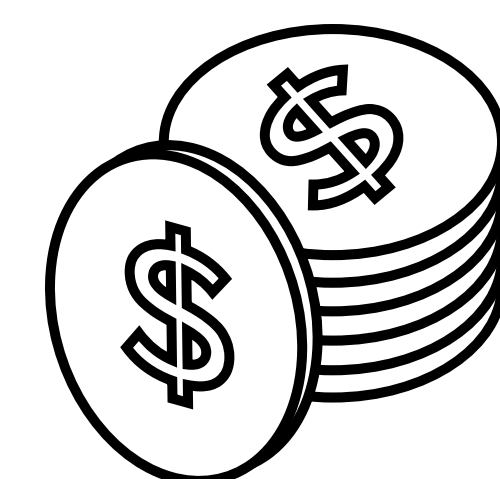


## Barriers to Food Security

The factors driving food insecurity in the Rio Grande Valley are multidimensional. High rates of poverty leave large segments of the population struggling to pay for food when faced with other competing priorities and basic necessities (i.e., rent, utilities, medical expenses, etc.). Lack of transportation and inadequate public infrastructure present barriers to accessing food. Family instability due to divorce, domestic violence and incarceration contributes to food insecurity.



These factors are compounded by proposed immigration reforms and increased law enforcement activities related to border security. Many families live in mixed-status households in which one or more family members may lack legal residency or citizenship. Families are afraid to leave their homes to access feeding programs such as the Summer Meals Program. The recent public charge debate is contributing to a climate of fear that discourages eligible participation in nutrition assistance programs. Consequently, food insecurity among immigrant households is estimated as twice that of other households in the United States.[9]



# THE TRIPLE THREAT OF FOOD INSECURITY

Food insecurity is a threat to the **health, social and economic** well-being of thousands of Texans across the Rio Grande Valley.



The devastating health consequences of food insecurity are well-documented. People who are food insecure are at higher risk of developing chronic diseases such as type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, cancer, heart disease and obesity. [10] Food insecure children and seniors are more likely to experience acute health complications related to nutrition deficiencies such as iron deficiency anemia (IDA), [11] asthma and gum disease. [12] IDA is a health indicator associated with adverse cognitive and behavioral consequences in children. [13] Moreover, children who experience hunger struggle academically and socially in school. [14] Food insecure seniors are 78% more likely to experience depression and 21% more likely to experience activity-limiting health impairments. [15] Mobility impairments in seniors contributes to increased isolation and loneliness; limits seniors' ability to obtain and prepare food; and increases the risk of serious injury due to falls.

Food insecurity not only impacts the health and social well-being of Texans but also has economic consequences: higher health and educational expenditures and lower worker readiness and productivity. [16] Workers who experienced hunger in childhood are "not as well prepared physically, mentally, emotionally or socially to perform effectively in the contemporary work force." [17] Children who are hungry are more likely to be sick leading to higher costs for employers due to parent absences and turnover in the workforce. [18]

An analysis by the Center for American Progress estimated that in 2010 hunger cost the Texas economy \$16 billion in the form of lost economic productivity, increased public education costs, avoidable healthcare costs and charity costs to feed hungry families. [19] Additionally, lost lifetime earnings across the U.S. due to food insecurity and associated poor educational outcomes were estimated at \$19.2 billion. [20]

Through effects accumulating over time, food insecurity impacts the health, social and economic well-being of Texas. Reducing food insecurity thus is imperative to growing a healthy, educated workforce; promoting healthy aging; and reducing costly healthcare burdens passed on to taxpayers.



# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS: A CALL TO ACTION

The following recommendations provide a menu of policy options to strengthen child and senior food security.

## Children

1

Streamline regulations for school breakfast, school lunch, after-school meals, and summer meals in order to produce a year round, seamless operational program

**Purpose:**

- Reduce duplicative administrative processes for program participation and reimbursement
- Simplify meal pattern requirements
- Ensure adequate fruit and vegetable components across all meal programs

2

Continue to support funding for Texas Department of Agriculture's (TDA) Food and Nutrition Division's School-Based and Community-Based feeding programs and Texas Health & Human Services' SNAP and WIC programs

**Purpose:**

- Ensure the sustainability of nutrition assistance programs in Texas
- Reduce TDA Program Specialist turnover
- Strengthen capacity of TDA Program Specialists through adequate training

3

Assist public schools in operating food pantries and sharing tables in alignment with the Texas Student Fairness in Feeding Act which allows unopened, packaged food to be made available through campus operated pantries (HB 367/SB 725)

**Purpose:**

- Expand number of pantry sites through child nutrition programs by re-distributing unopened cafeteria food items to families in need
- Provide guidance to school districts on establishing local criteria for food distribution
- Reduce food waste

4

Expand opportunities for hunger relief organizations to collect leftover crops that have been commercially harvested or left in fields where it is not economically profitable to harvest

**Purpose:**

- Expand access to fresh fruits and vegetables
- Reduce food waste

5

Fund community health worker (CHWs) networks (promotores de salud) to assist families in navigating the application and renewal processes for nutrition assistance programs

**Purpose:**

- Expand access to nutritious food available through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) Program
- Recognize the vital services provided by CHWs in connecting community members with nutrition programs

6

Expand navigator training opportunities for Parental Involvement staff at school districts to assist parents of enrolled children to apply for or renew SNAP benefits as part of required annual professional development

**Purpose:**

- Expand access to nutritious food available through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS: A CALL TO ACTION

7

## Establish a Texas SNAP Double Bucks program at farmers markets

### Purpose:

- Expand access to locally grown nutritious food
- Support local growers
- Incentivize SNAP redemption at farmers' markets

8

## Expand voucher redemption period for WIC Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (FMNP)

### Purpose:

- Align WIC FMNP voucher redemption period with regional growing seasons
- Expand access to locally grown nutritious food
- Support local growers

9

## Invest in local Active Transportation Plans that enhance walking and bicycling infrastructure

### Purpose:

- Expand multi-modal transportation options by increasing connectivity to grocery stores, farmers' markets, food pantries, etc.
- Reduce transportation barriers to food access

10

## Expand Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) options for children and their caregivers to eat together at the same site

### Purpose:

- Reduce barriers to participation

11

## Provide incentives for school districts to establish food gardening programs

### Purpose:

- Promote consumption of fruits and vegetables in school meals
- Promote understanding of agricultural production
- Integrate gardening programs with high school graduation requirements relating to the *Business and Industry Endorsement* (i.e. Agriculture, Food & Natural Resources)

12

## Provide incentives for the private sector to support hunger relief programming

### Purpose:

- Leverage private sector resources to address food insecurity
- Foster public-private partnerships

## Seniors

1

**Increase community outreach and enrollment assistance for eligible seniors to participate in nutrition assistance programs**

**Purpose:**

- Ensure eligible seniors have access to affordable, nutritious food through SNAP and CACFP
- Ensure sufficient numbers of trained navigators to meet the needs of this vulnerable population
- Increase consumption of fruits and vegetables

2

**Require the delivery of evidence-based nutrition and physical activity education in state funded services provided to seniors.**

**Purpose:**

- Expand enrichment programming focused on nutrition and health outcomes in adult day care centers and home-based care
- Promote consumption of fruits and vegetables
- Improve independent living and mobility

3

**Expand mobile food pantries in rural, unincorporated areas and stationary food pantries operating in community centers, libraries, schools and churches**

**Purpose:**

- Reduce transportation barriers to food access
- Leverage existing physical assets in the community

# ENDNOTES

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