

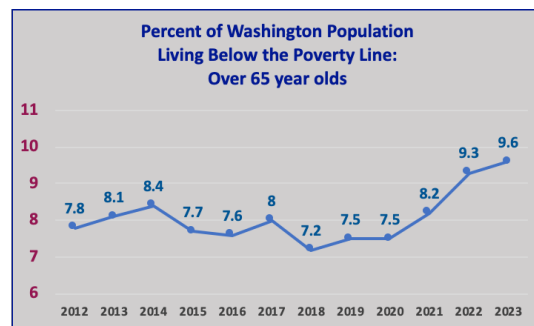


Rising Poverty among Washington Seniors Leads to Hunger: Investments Needed to Sustain Senior Nutrition Services

Invest \$35.4 million to cover current caseload for senior nutrition programs!

The “age wave” – the significant increase of people over age 65 – has reached Washington’s shores, yet too many of our seniors are struggling to meet their basic needs. In every part of our state, in partnership with DSHS, Area Agency on Aging (AAA) programs provide food through hot meals at community sites, senior center food pantries, mobile food pantries, and Meals on Wheels to make sure seniors have enough nutritious food to stay healthy and hunger-free.

Poverty among Washington seniors has increased sharply since 2020: **it is now the highest rate in the past decade, with nearly 1 in 10 seniors in poverty.** The [USDA’s recently released food insecurity data for 2023](#) shows 9.3% of households with a person over age 65 were food insecure. Seniors are the most likely to qualify for only the minimum SNAP benefit: just \$23 per month to buy groceries.



Washington has underinvested in the nutrition safety net for seniors and people with disabilities. Our state budget hasn’t added ongoing funding for these critical, targeted senior meals programs in years – despite having more seniors, and more seniors in poverty. *The budget must keep pace with the current level of need.* The evidence is clear that senior nutrition programs are an essential:

- **Meal programs promote health for seniors and people with disabilities.** Healthy, regular meals prevent hospitalization, delay residential care, and protect against frailty and damaging falls.
- **Group meal programs combat loneliness,** an epidemic among our seniors. Loneliness and isolation have far-reaching impacts, with health consequences as bad as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. *Too many clients say their hot meal is the only time they socialize during the week.*
- **Meal programs help seniors prevent food insecurity and manage related illnesses:** seniors who are food insecure are 65% more likely to be diabetic, and also likely to suffer from conditions such as congestive heart failure, high blood pressure, asthma, and obesity.
- **Meal programs sustain and connect seniors with community safety nets.** Senior centers serve as hubs, with volunteers delivering meals as well as other services, like haircuts or foot care. AAA nutrition funding enhances clients’ independence and dignity. *If seniors are in trouble, meal providers connect them to essential social services to avert a crisis.*

In 2023, AAA nutrition programs served over 3.2 million meals for 49,000 seniors and people with disabilities. **Together, our coalition urges the legislature to add \$35.4 million (ongoing) to feed the current caseload of hungry seniors and people with disabilities.**

Individual and Community Impact of Senior Nutrition Services:

Home Delivered Meals

Whitman County: Our meals on wheels volunteer called to say the client didn't answer the door. She lived alone. We called the sheriff for a wellness check, and they found our client was on the floor from a fall two days earlier. Thank goodness we were able to get her help!

Seattle: "It is so nice to see a smiling face when my meals are delivered. Sometimes I can feel so alone and apart from the world in my home. The program is so valuable to me."

Vancouver: Mary was a nurse for 40 years. "Inflation caused a great change in my life," she said. After six months of eating mostly Cheerios and tuna fish, a friend helped Mary sign up for meal delivery through Meals on Wheels People – and Mary said it saved her life: "I'm alive because of what you guys do. I probably was going to starve to death. Now, I've got actual real food to eat every day."

Group Meals

Richland: We got a call from a daughter who was really concerned about her mom. After her dad died a year ago, her mom was struggling with depression and was "wasting away." We sent meals on wheels out, and at first, she would barely open the door to take the meal. Over time, she got to know the volunteers and built friendships. Today, she volunteers to deliver meals and runs a widow's support group at the meal site with her friends.

Port Angeles: "I'm homeless and live in a shelter. I come to the senior center for normalcy. The meals here put protein into me. I know I'm having a good meal."

Pasco: We have a meal site that serves cultural meals twice a week. One Hispanic gentleman who participates took me aside, he was so excited. He had just come from the doctor who said, "Whatever you are doing, keep doing it." He comes to the meal site with his friends, and thanks to the meals he is eating vegetables. They joined an exercise club together, and for the first time in ten years his diabetes is under control. He now brings friends to the meal site to "get healed."

Colton: We started by setting up a few tables, and people spread out to eat. They eventually congregated to one table or another with friends, as the group grew. Last week, the seniors at the site decided this is how they wanted their tables set up... like one big family!