

Food Security Needs Assessment 2022

I. Assessment Overview

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines food insecurity as “a lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life,” which is a “household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food.”¹ Demand for food support increased dramatically during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially among low-income individuals who faced greater struggles to overcome the resulting economic challenges. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2020, low-income families spent an average of 11% of their budget on groceries, whereas high income households spent around 7%.² Low-income families commit higher proportions of their budget to rent, utilities, health insurance and other necessities when compared to high income families, further stressing limited household budgets, and widening systemic income inequalities during times of economic hardship.

In response to this challenge, Ramsey County has strengthened the food security system by delivering more than 500,000 meals to residents in 2020-21, supporting food shelves and other food programs to provide culturally appropriate foods and expand their infrastructure to meet increased demand, and funding organizations that serve youth whose service-industry livelihoods were deeply impacted by COVID-related shutdowns. In addition, Ramsey County’s Statewide Health Improvement Partnership (SHIP) grant supported farmers markets, expanded food support for those experiencing homelessness, and contributed funding to the development of various analytical and communications materials, including the [Food Communications and Resource Page](#) and this assessment.

Ramsey County also appointed a Food Security Coordinator to serve as the primary convener to facilitate this broad systems assessment that examines food security systems from a holistic perspective, not just as the last step of providing food to residents. The assessment process started in late 2021 and continued throughout 2022. It was rooted in community engagement and included broad stakeholder input from partners across the food system. The results of this assessment are being used to improve efficiency, reduce waste, fill gaps, and build a more resilient food system for all residents, especially those who are most vulnerable to food

¹ USDA ERS (2021, Sept. 8). “Definitions of Food Security.” <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-u-s/definitions-of-food-security/>

² Siegel, R. (2022, Feb. 13). “‘Survival Mode’: Inflation falls hardest on low-income Americans.” *Washington Post* <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2022/02/13/low-income-high-inflation-inequality/>.

insecurity. The results also help to answer the long-standing question: “What is Ramsey County’s role in supporting greater food security?”

II. Assessing Food Insecurity

This assessment was undertaken as an iterative process, with each step building on the previous effort. It commenced with a full review of food insecurity rates found in quantitative data specific to Ramsey County, followed by significant community engagement efforts undertaken through in-depth interviews with service providers, an online survey sent to service providers and recipients of food support, and in-person collection of more than 300 qualitative surveys with community members at six pop-up events. Each of these elements is described in more detail below.

a. Quantitative Data Review

Measuring hunger is a challenging task; this assessment used data as proxy measures to show the status of food insecurity in Ramsey County. Whereas one measure alone does not tell the extent of food insecurity, when taken together, they offer a snapshot of the extent to which residents in our county are experiencing hunger. The data review process analyzed Ramsey County’s 2020 Food Needs Assessment and 2021 Food and Basic Needs Survey data, as well as primary data captured by Ramsey County’s Financial Assistance Services (FAS) Department for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). In addition, secondary data reported by other government and non-government entities were analyzed, as well as information shared cooperatively by local community-based organizations working to address hunger like Meals on Wheels (which primarily serves elderly residents), school feeding programs (serving school-aged children), and The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) Food Shelves operating within Ramsey County. Data from each of these sources are analyzed below. (See Appendix A for a full list of Sources Consulted.)

i. Ramsey County SNAP and WIC Rates

Ramsey County supports greater food security by administering the SNAP and WIC programs, among other programs. WIC addresses gaps in the nutrition needs of low-income families by funding supplemental foods, health care referrals, and nutrition education for pregnant, lactating, and postpartum parents, and to infants and children up to age five at nutritional risk. SNAP benefits are intended to supplement work earnings to stretch food budgets for those with lower incomes.

While many states set their SNAP income limit at 125% of the US Federal Poverty Guidelines (FPG), Minnesota was using 165% of FPG (\$45,787 for a family of four) until it was expanded to 200% of FPG (\$55,500 for a family of four) on September 1, 2022. This change made an estimated 28,000 more people eligible for SNAP benefits: according to the 2021 Census data estimates, 141,997 individuals were eligible for SNAP based on the 165% of FPG guideline, which increased to 169,925 individuals eligible for SNAP at the 200% FPG guideline. In 2021, a total of 82,912 Ramsey County residents received SNAP benefits.

Analysis of beneficiary data for SNAP and WIC usage rates in Ramsey County shows significant racial and ethnic inequities. As shown in Figure 1 below, some racial and ethnic groups use SNAP and WIC at rates disproportionate to their size of the county population and those who identify as being from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds are more likely to be food insecure and/or struggle with financial barriers that make them eligible for SNAP and WIC. The following analysis demonstrates how the county's population accesses SNAP and WIC at widely different rates depending on the racial and ethnic identities.

White residents make up 60% of the total population in Ramsey County (2021 US Census estimates³) but represent 25% of total SNAP recipients and 9% of total WIC recipients. In 2021, Ramsey County had 17,229 White residents on SNAP, versus an estimated total population of 325,411, which means that about **1 in 20 White residents** (5%) received SNAP benefits.

Black, and African American residents make up 13% of the total county population but represent 38% of total SNAP recipients and 29% of total WIC recipients. This translates to 30,691 Black residents on SNAP in 2021, versus an estimated total population of 72,796 residents, which means that **nearly half of all Black residents** in Ramsey County (42%) received SNAP benefits.

Asian residents make up 15% of the total county population but represent 30% of total SNAP recipients and 39% of total WIC recipients. In 2021, 24,974 Asian residents were on SNAP, versus an estimated total population of 85,291, which means that about **3 in 10 Asian residents** (29%) received SNAP benefits.

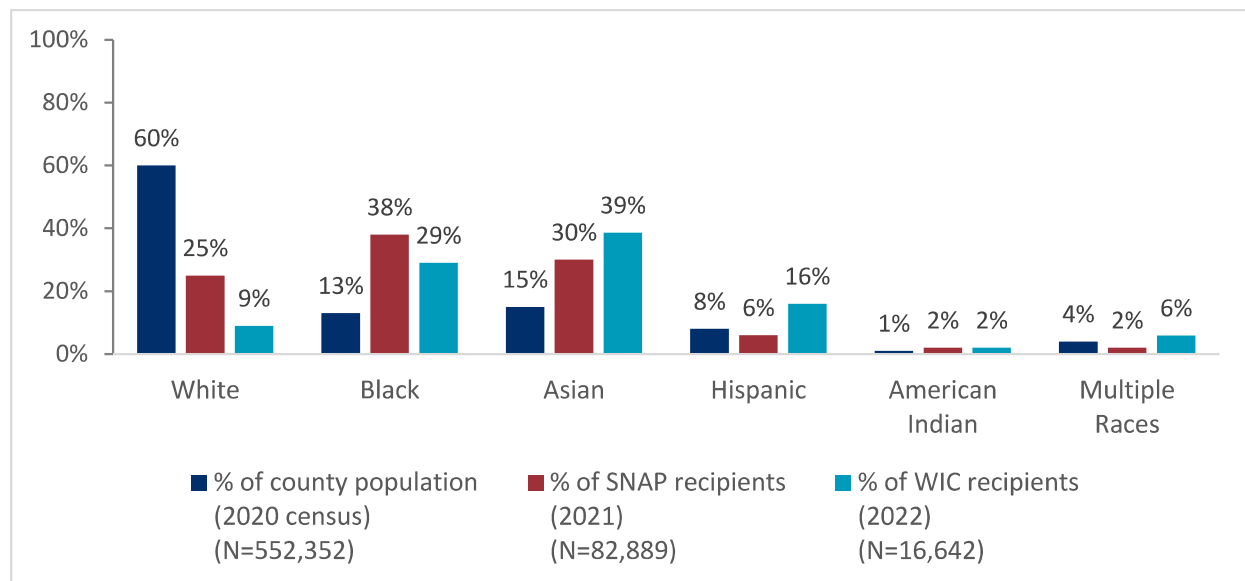
Hispanic residents make up 8% of the total county population but represent 6% of total SNAP recipients and 16% of total WIC recipients. In 2021, 5,036 Hispanic residents were on SNAP, versus an estimated total population of 42,531, which means that about **1 in 10 Hispanic residents** (12%) received SNAP benefits.

³ Total population estimates by race based on 2021 US Census estimates of Ramsey County's population disaggregated by race and used for all race and ethnic groups in this report:
<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/ramseycountyminnesota>.

American Indian residents (including Native Alaskans, Hawaiians, and other Pacific Islanders) make up 1% of the total county population but represent 2% of total SNAP recipients and 2% of total WIC recipients. In 2021, 1,138 American Indian residents were on SNAP, versus an estimated total population of 6,075, which means that about **1 in 5 American Indian residents** (19%) received SNAP benefits.

Multiple race residents make up 4% of the total county population but represent 2% of total SNAP recipients and 6% of total WIC recipients. In 2021, there were 2,462 Multiple Race residents on SNAP, versus an estimated total population of 20,989, which means that about **1 in 10 Multiple Race residents** (12%) received SNAP benefits.

Figure 1. Ramsey County SNAP and WIC rates by race and ethnicity, compared to population size



These data demonstrate a trend that is seen across many social service benefits programs that Black, Asian, and American Indian residents access services at higher rates proportionate to their overall population than do White, Hispanic, and Mixed-Race residents. While it is important to ensure that residents who need food assistance can access it, the fact that nearly half of the county's Black population qualifies for SNAP because they meet the federal guidelines for being low income illustrates the ongoing legacy of redlining and other policies that continue to impact the economic vitality of our Black communities. On the other hand, seeing that just over 10% of Hispanic and Mixed-Race residents, and 5% of White residents are accessing SNAP benefits indicates that there are other social barriers to receiving assistance that create challenges for these groups.

ii. SNAP Program Access Index (PAI)

This trend that racial and ethnic groups access food assistance at different rates is also reflected in the SNAP Program Access Index (PAI). The USDA, which supervises state and county administration of SNAP benefits, uses SNAP PAI as a proxy measure to determine the degree to which states reach low-income people who may be eligible for SNAP. The USDA uses SNAP PAI annually as a basis for awarding performance incentives to the top four states with the best performance, and the top four most improved states.⁴

The USDA's SNAP PAI calculation divides the average number of people eligible for SNAP per month by the American Community Survey's (ACS) 2020 five-year estimated number of people living at or below 125% of the Federal Poverty Guideline (FPG), as demonstrated in the graphic below.⁵

$$\text{PAI} = \frac{\text{Average number of people eligible for SNAP per month}}{\text{Estimated number of people living at or below 125\% of the Federal Poverty Guideline}}$$

However, as noted above, Minnesota had used 165% of FPG as the SNAP guideline until 2022, when it was increased to 200%. When interpreting SNAP PAI, a score of 100% indicates that individuals whose incomes are below the indicated level are accessing SNAP successfully.⁶ As shown in Figure 2, Ramsey County's SNAP PAI rating in 2021 was about 51% (at the 165% FPG level), which indicates that about half of those whose income is less than 165% of the FPG receive SNAP benefits. When these outcomes are disaggregated by race, they show similar trends to the SNAP and WIC rates discussed above: Black, Asian, and American Indian residents' use of social benefits are higher, above 60%, but White, Hispanic, and Multiple Race residents' uptake rates are lower, below 30%.

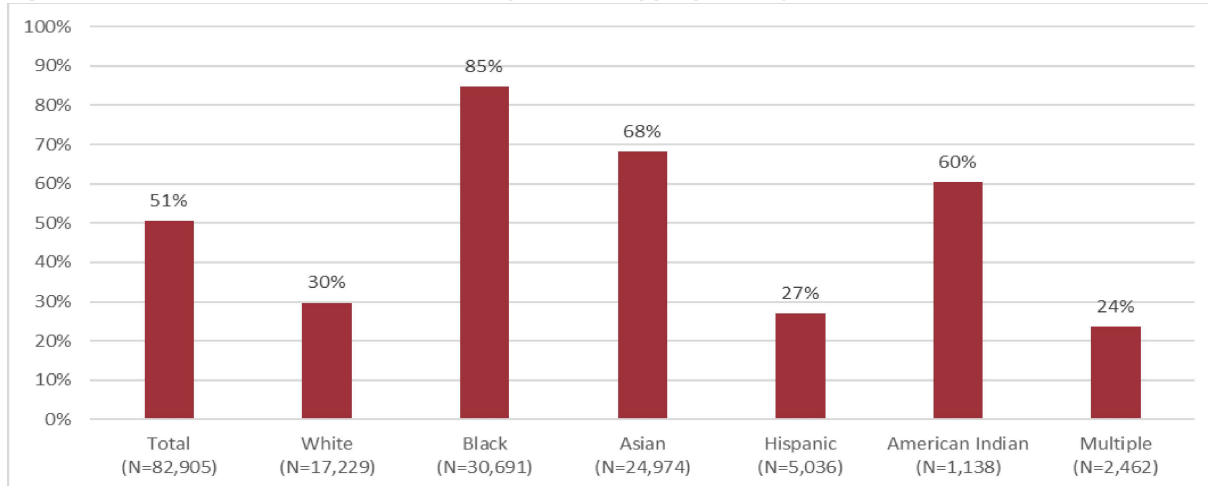
Black residents access SNAP benefits at the highest rate (85%) of all the cohorts, as shown in Figure 2 below. American Indian and Asian residents' access rates are 60% and 68% respectively, indicating that about two-thirds of these residents who meet the income guideline are accessing SNAP benefits in Ramsey County. However, access rates for White, Hispanic, and Multiple Race residents indicate that fewer than half of the residents whose incomes meet this threshold are accessing SNAP benefits (although there are other eligibility factors that are not considered in this calculation).

⁴ USDA Food and Nutrition Service. (2015). Calculating the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Program Access Index: a Step-by-Step Guide for 2013. <https://www.cwda.org/sites/main/files/file-attachments/pai2013.pdf?1455134856>

⁵ For 2022, 125% of the FPG for a family of four is \$34,688, 165% is \$45,788 and 200% is \$55,500 for a family of four. Source: [Federal Poverty Guidelines - ProJusticeMN](#)

⁶ Totals do not equal out because all are averages for each group over the calendar year.

Figure 2. SNAP PAI Access Rates at 165% of FPG, disaggregated by race, 2021



iii. Mapping Food Insecurity in Ramsey County

The University of Minnesota’s Healthy Food, Healthy Lives Institute hosts a Food Security Dashboard that reports food insecurity rates based on Feeding America’s Map the Meal Gap research. The map shows that the **most food insecure areas are the University Ave Corridor** and the **Frogtown/Capitol Heights/North End** communities, including tracts 336, 337 and 428. Two of these tracts have food insecurity rates over 25% and the third is 23.5%. Tract 327, covering the **Como and Western community**, follows as the third most food insecure area at 23.5%, and tract 319, covering the area just east of the **University Avenue intersection with Hwy 280**, as the fourth most food insecure tract, at 23.5%. Table 1 provides food insecurity rates by tract number and neighborhood description.

Table 1. Ramsey County’s Most Food Insecure Census Tracts, 2021 est.

Tract Number	Tract Description	Food Insecurity Rate (%)
305	North End	22.9
314		21.6
327	Como/Western Ave.	23.5
319	University Ave. & Hwy 280	23.5
334	University Ave Corridor from Fairview to Rice Street (moving west to east)	22.1
335		22.0
336		23.5
337		25.9
359	W. 7 th St. & Grand Ave.	21.0
428	Capitol Heights	25.2
310	Payne-Phalen	20.7

Tract Number	Tract Description	Food Insecurity Rate (%)
315		22.3
317	East Side & Prosperity Heights	21.9
318		21.3
361	Concord-Robert	23.4

The tracts that are the **least food insecure** are **Roseville** north of County Road B, between Lexington Ave. and Rice Street, with the area between Lexington and Dale having the lowest food insecurity rate in the county at 6.4%. The **Battle Creek** neighborhood from Bailey Road in the south to Hudson Road in the north, between McKnight and Century Avenue also has low food insecurity at 6.7% and 7.1% in two census tracts. Finally, the **Bellaire community** from Highway 61 in the east to County Road F in the south and Shore Boulevard in the north has low food insecurity rates, at 7.1%. Table 2 below provides food insecurity rates by tract number and neighborhood description for the least food insecure communities.

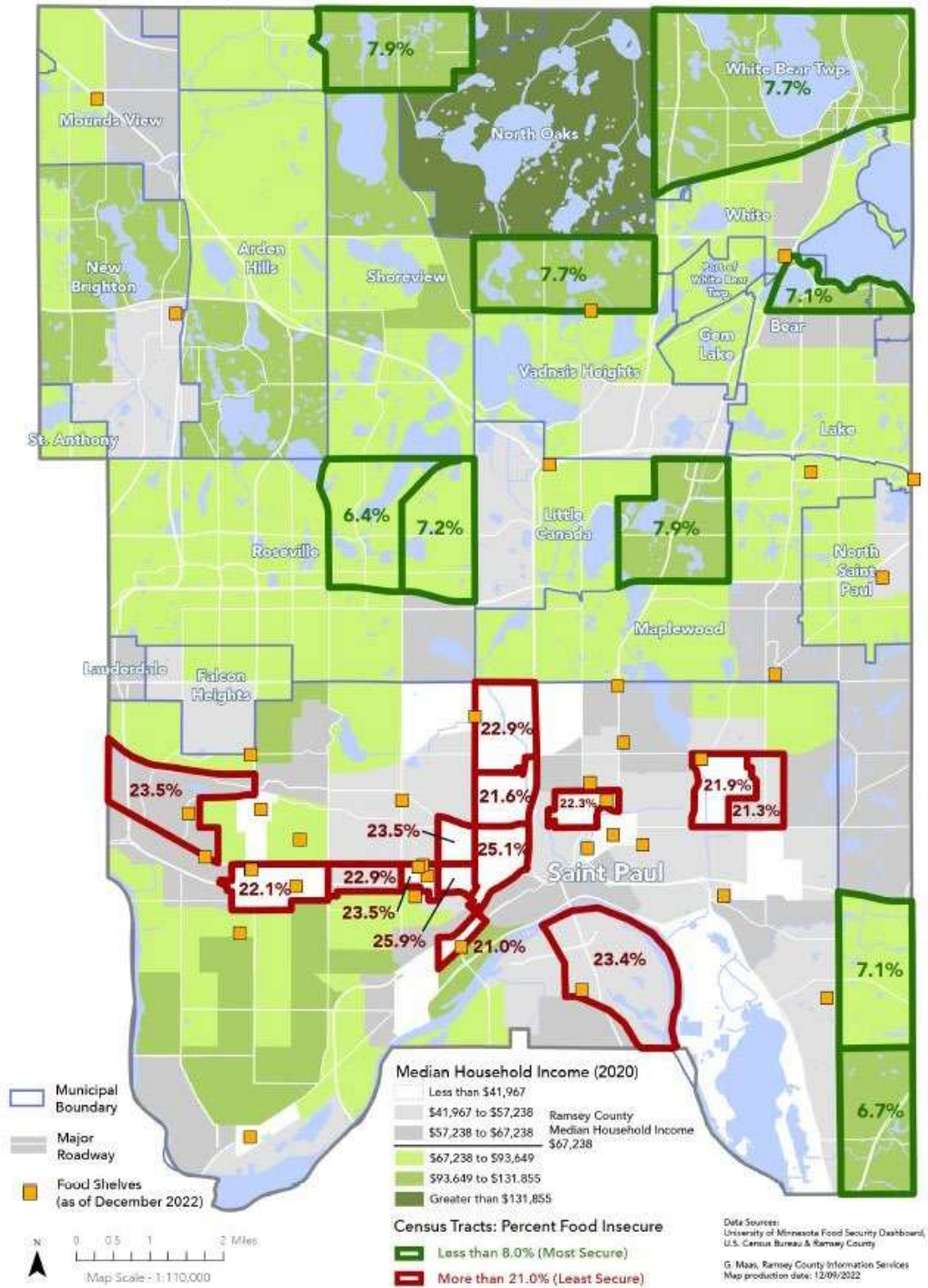
Table 2. Ramsey County's Least Food Insecure Census Tracts, 2021 est.

Tract Number	Tract Description	Food Insecurity Rate (%)
401	White Bear Lake	7.7
403.01	Bellaire	7.1
406.03	Vadnais Heights	7.7
404.06	Arden Hills	7.9
415	Roseville north of Cty. Rd. B (moving west to east)	6.4
416.01		7.2
423.01	North Maplewood	7.9
425.03	Battle Creek	6.7
425.04		7.1

When these tracts are mapped out and compared to the median household income of the community, it shows the clear relationship between poverty and food insecurity rates. Of the most food insecure tracts (rates above 21%), all have earning rates below the median household income level, with 10 of them earning less than \$41,967/year. All of them fall in or near the urban core, in communities with higher proportions of residents who are racially or ethnically diverse.

Conversely, the nine least food insecure tracts, those with food insecurity rates under 8%, are all located in affluent suburbs in which White residents are a higher proportion of the tract's population than the county average (about 60%). Figure 3 below shows the distribution of these most and least food insecure tracts, along with the median household income for the area.

Figure 3. Food Insecurity Rates and Median Household Incomes of Most and Least Food Insecure Tracts

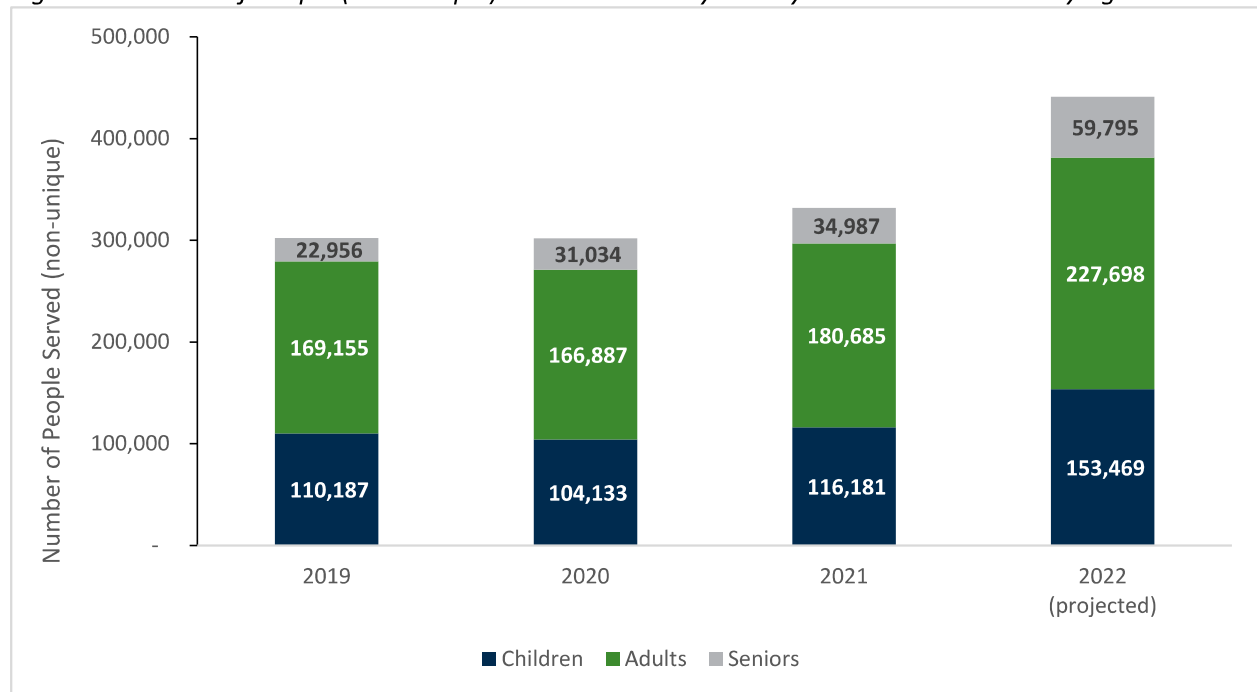


iv. TEFAP Food Shelf Usage Rates

The Minnesota Department of Human Services (MDH) collects data on food shelves funded by TEFAP, a federally funded program that provides emergency food assistance to Americans in need. In 2022, there were 42 TEFAP food shelves operating in Ramsey County, which are projected to distribute more than 8.7 million pounds by the end of 2022.

As shown in Figure 4 below, use of food shelves has increased dramatically since the start of the pandemic. In 2019, food shelves served just over 300,000 individuals (non-unique) per year. This stayed about the same in 2020 before increasing by about 10% in 2021. However, thus far in 2022, the food shelves are projected to reach more than 440,000 individuals, which is nearly a 50% increase from pre-pandemic levels. Seniors' demand has increased by more than 160% since the start of the pandemic.

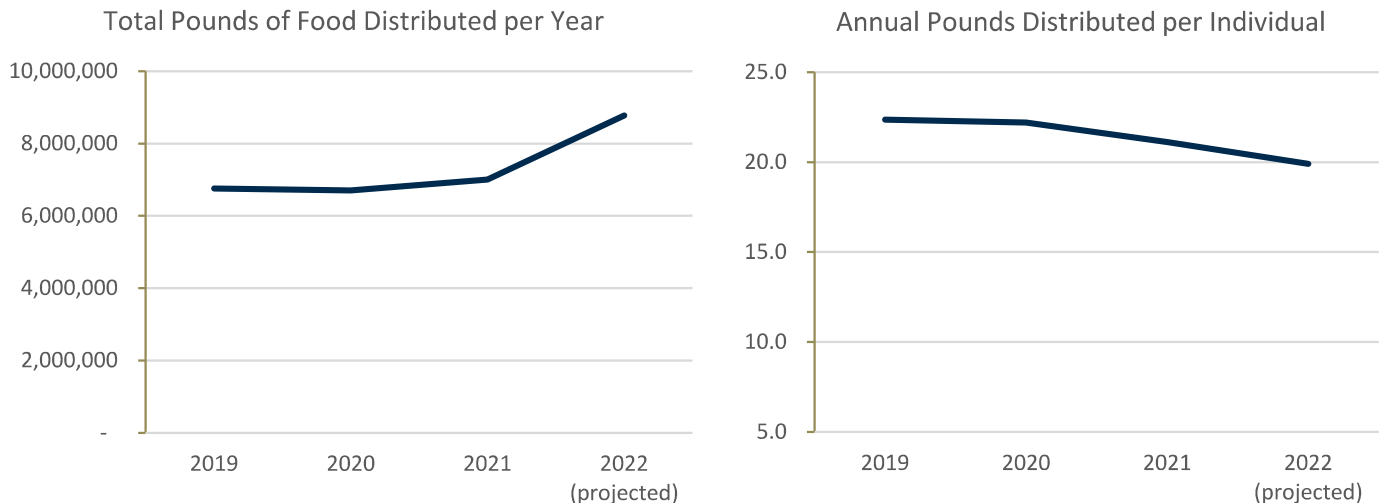
Figure 4. Number of People (Non-unique) Served in Ramsey County TEFAP Food Shelves by age cohort



In addition to the number of people served, MDH also collects data on the total pounds of food distributed per year and the pounds of food distributed per person. As shown in Figures 5 and 6 below, TEFAP food shelves are projected to distribute more than 8.7 million pounds of food during 2022, which is an increase of about 25% from 2021. However, the demand is also higher: projections indicate that TEFAP food shelves will serve at least 100,000 more (non-unique)

individuals than in 2021. Therefore, the pounds distributed per person is projected to fall below 20 pounds a person, which will be a decrease of about 12.5% since the start of the pandemic.

Figures 5 & 6. Total Pounds of Food Distributed per Year and Annual Pounds Distributed per Individual at Ramsey County TEFAP Food Shelves



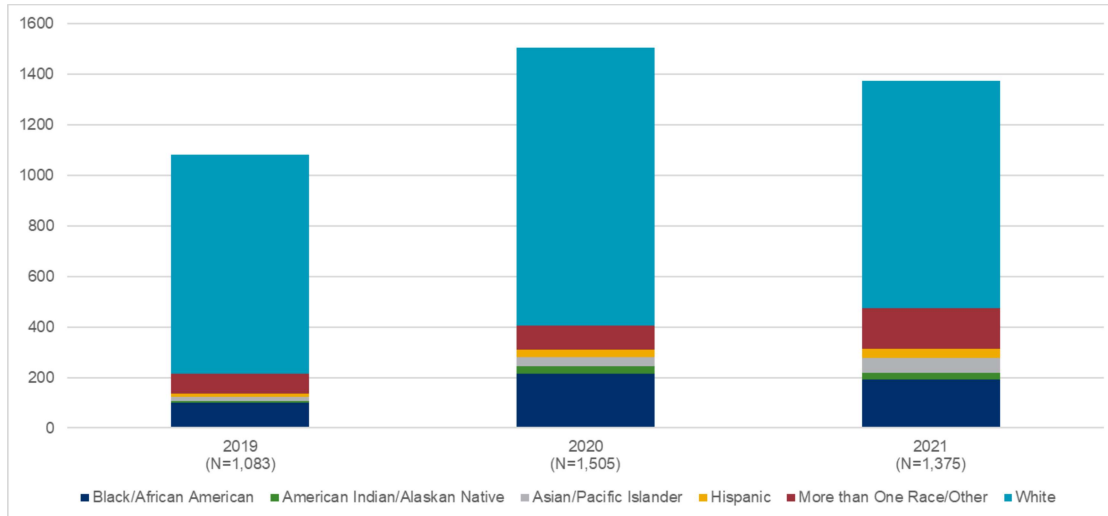
v. Meals on Wheels Usage Rates

Meals on Wheels of Ramsey County (MOW) is a private, non-profit organization managed by the Senior Services Consortium of Ramsey County with funding support from the county (in addition to other sources). MOW provides home delivery service of ready-to-eat hot meals and/or pre-prepared frozen meals for elderly residents and residents with disabilities.

In 2019 (pre-pandemic), MOW served 136,956 meals to 1,083 residents, for an average of 126 meals per person per year. In 2020, the number of individuals served grew by nearly 50%: MOW served 175,650 meals to 1,505 residents, for an average of about 117 meals per person, per year. In 2021, MOW served 210,489 meals to 1,375 people, or about 153 meals per person, per year. In other words, while fewer residents received assistance in 2021, those who did receive food needed more assistance than they did prior to COVID, which indicates that the most vulnerable residents needed more support.

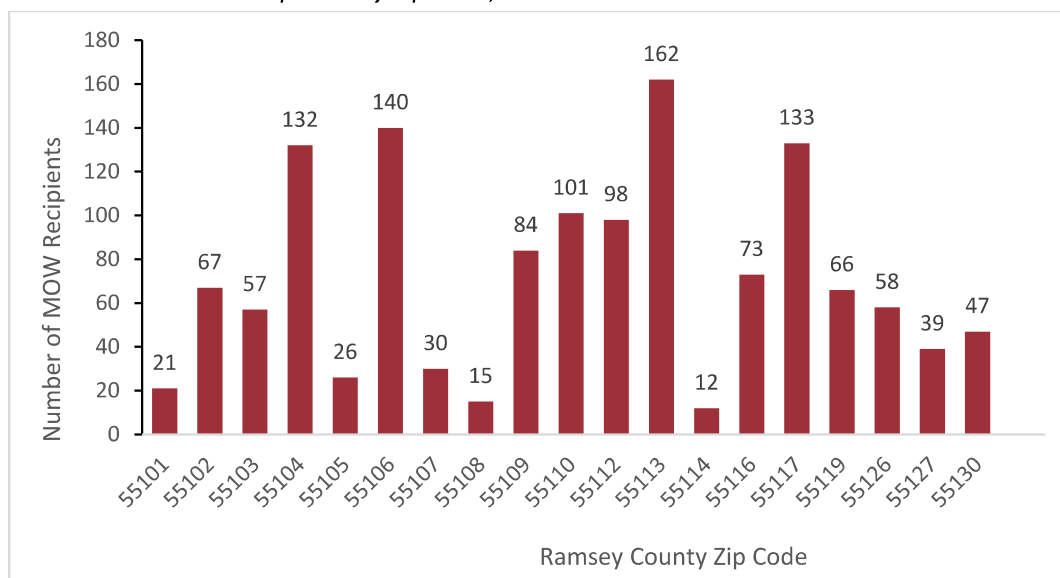
As shown in Figure 7 below, MOW service is predominantly used by white residents, who comprise between 65-80% of beneficiaries between 2019-2021. However, Black/African American and Mixed-Race beneficiaries grew as a percentage of MOW recipients in that time, increasing from 9 to 14%, and 7 to 12% of recipients, respectively.

Figure 7. Meals on Wheels usage in Ramsey County disaggregated by race, 2019-2021



As shown in Figure 8 below, disaggregating 2021 MOW usage numbers by zip code demonstrates four primary clusters where recipients were located: 55014 (Hamline/Midway), 55106 (East Side), 55113 (Roseville), and 55117 (North End and 35E corridor). These are areas in which more elderly residents are clustered. (While MOW is open to anyone who can pay the minimal cost to receive food, public and private financial assistance is offered to recipients over the age of 50 who are unable to pay the fees and/or recipients with disabilities.)

Figure 8. Meals on Wheels recipients by zip code, 2021



vi. School Feeding Program Usage Rates

Childhood hunger rates in Ramsey County are higher than the statewide rate: in 2017-18, nearly 3 out of 5 children (55.9%) in Ramsey County received free or reduced lunch as compared to the MN average of 37.5%. According to Feeding America's Map the Meal Gap, 20% of Ramsey County children (or 1 in 5) were estimated to be food insecure in 2020.

In the past, uptake rates of free school lunch were used as a proxy measure of child hunger. However, during COVID, all children were eligible to receive Universal Free School lunch. This benefit expired in June 2022 and Map the Meal Gap projected a decline in child hunger rates in 2021 (still forthcoming at the time of this assessment). However, anecdotal evidence from local food assistance providers who participated in the interviews (discussed in the next section) as well as in informal discussions, indicates childhood hunger rates have risen in 2022. For the 2022-23 school year, students whose family income is less than 185% of the federal poverty guideline meet the income requirements for free or reduced lunch (there are other criteria, as well). Children whose families receive SNAP or Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP) (or those living in a household that includes a foster child) do not have to provide information on their income for their application; however, WIC recipients do have to provide income information. The free or reduced school lunch program requires a formal application process, presenting an additional barrier for many students and their families that may be a contributing factor in low uptake rates among Hispanic and Latinx residents.

b. Community Engagement Data

i. Service Provider Interviews

Starting in late 2021, the Food Security Coordinator conducted a series of interviews with more than 75 service providers representing food shelves, food banks, volunteers at pop-up distribution points, service organizations, state and local leaders, and community groups. Discussions represented the first steps in community engagement and focused on identifying the gaps and opportunities to improve food security in Ramsey County. This engagement was also a first step in the process of recruiting appropriate and engaged participants for the External Governance Team, which is discussed more at the end of this report.

Key themes that emerged from the service provider interviews included: improving county-administered social benefits systems, strengthening the food shelf and safety net system, building resiliency through enhanced urban agriculture, land access and local economy in the food system, and improving access and service provision of policy support and other communication efforts to align partner and county work. Discussion topics and recommendations shared by interviewees within each of these thematic areas is described in more detail below.

Theme 1. Funding and Social Benefits

- Funding for culturally appropriate foods and to meet health needs.
- Increased funding for smaller organizations servicing specific culturally and ethnically diverse communities.
- Rising costs of basic food items due to inflation.
- Policy impacts.
- Farm bill.
- Universal Free School Meals.
- Expansion of SNAP/WIC/county benefits through direct communications (make sure those eligible apply) eligibility (just over threshold), working requirements and expanding waivers.
- Form internal work groups for specific benefits process workflow improvements (Service Center Navigators who advise residents on access to wrap-around services, WIC, SNAP, housing, health care).

Theme 2. Strengthening the Food Safety Net System

- Increased opportunities for delivery (scheduling); alternative transportation support (buses, walking, safety); proximity of distribution sites.
- Infrastructure and capacity support to meet demand (storage for fresh foods/staff) volunteers and communications, expanding hours.
- Less paperwork for access; communications around public charge (someone who is primarily dependent on public assistance for their subsistence).
- Local ordering systems from farmers to food shelves.
- Food rescue and delivery to food shelves (reduce waste).
- Wraparound model at food shelves (Service Center Navigators).
- Centralized donations for food shelves and other food system organizations.

Theme 3. Urban Agriculture

- Allow access to land for urban agriculture, zoning for green space and food supply.
- Database for local farmers to sell directly to hospital systems, restaurants.
- Supporting the local economy through food system upgrades.

Theme 4. Access and Service Provision

- Communications campaign (linking college students and seniors to county benefits); multilingual, phone-based, remove shame surrounding hunger.
- Focus on Trusted Messengers to expand access.
- Continue updating food access resources/map and knowledge of resources.
- Focus on ethnically and racially diverse communities and vulnerable populations - elders, young adults, pregnant mothers, disabled.
- Linking health care/hospitals to food safety net systems, including at discharge.
- Aligning food waste to feed people.

iv. Online Survey

Informed by the service provider interviews discussed above, an online survey was launched in January 2022 to gather inputs from service providers and food assistance recipients about the status of food insecurity in the county. Potential respondents were recruited by direct invitation using Ramsey County's Food Security Update newsletter distributed periodically via email to a 1,600-person subscriber list that largely includes food service providers. Paper copies of the survey were also disseminated through Ramsey County's Public Health Child and Teen Checkups office, but no completed copies were returned.

Survey questions included closed-ended quantitative measures and open-ended qualitative (write-in) questions to gather more detailed responses (see Appendix B for a copy of the survey). Some of the questions were differentiated by respondent type: respondents representing food service providers were asked to describe the current demand for food support and provide qualitative inputs on policy and service provision recommendations; respondents who had received food benefits were asked about their experiences obtaining food from food shelves and what challenges they have faced in this process, including transportation and the appropriateness of food to their cultural and health needs. Both groups were asked to prioritize key food security needs from the same closed-ended list.

A total of 71 individuals attempted the online survey, of which eight people were disqualified for not meeting the eligibility requirements (i.e., they had not engaged with Ramsey County's food security systems within the past year). Sixty-two percent of the eligible respondents were service providers and 38% were food recipients. Food recipients were asked to self-identify race and ethnicity; 21 individuals chose to respond (a very small proportion), including 62% white, 19% Black/African American/American Descendent of Slavery, 9.5% African born (Somali,

Ethiopian, Liberian, Eritrean, etc.), and 9.5% Asian or Asian American (including Southeast Asian) respondents.

Survey respondents representing food assistance service providers included nine Food Shelf employees, seven Meals on Wheels/home delivered meals providers, and 22 other individuals representing other organizations, such as school feeding programs and community-based feeding organizations focused on food security. Of these, **70%** of providers said the **need for food had increased** in the past three months, with 40% saying it increased a lot.

Providers reported referrals were most frequently made to **food access points** like food shelves, followed by **Second Harvest Heartland**, then the **Ramsey County website**. Service Center **Navigators** was the lowest ranked resource with four respondents (out of 28) saying they had referred residents to Navigators as a resource for those seeking food assistance.

Providers most frequently requested **more funding** to obtain culturally appropriate foods and **easier access** to food support among the open-ended responses.

Respondents who had used food assistance in the past year preferred to receive information via social media rather than through the Ramsey County website or general Google search. Nearly half of these respondents said that transportation was an issue for them in accessing food.

Food recipients were asked to rate their experiences at food shelves. Overall, they reported positive experiences:

- o **Food shelf staff and volunteers' work was highly regarded**, they were reported to be friendly and helpful. Respondents said they did not need to fill out a lot of paperwork or show documentation (but two-thirds of respondents identified as White, so this is not a representative sample of all individuals' experiences).
- o Respondents said that they rarely had an opportunity to **choose their own food** and or choose from **different varieties of food**, with around 30% of respondents saying that never happens when they visit a food shelf.
- o The **wait times were sometimes long**, and the food shelf **environment could be uncomfortable** (e.g., lack of places to sit while they wait).

Both groups (service providers and food recipients) were asked to rate their top three priorities from within a closed set of issues that were identified as common barriers by the research team. These close-ended categories were developed through analysis of key topics from the 2021 Food Security Needs Assessment report and the responses to the key informant interviews (discussed in more detail below). As shown in Figure 9 below, 42 respondents completed the question and chose three priority areas. Transportation was rated the highest

priority (29) followed by need for fresh foods (22), and the right type of foods for cultural and medical needs (21), and information about food support is not available or people don't know how to access it (21) were tied for third priority.

Figure 9. Survey Respondents' Priority Areas in Food Insecurity



Survey respondents who had accessed food support in the past year most often used a car to pick up food (79% of respondents drove or got a ride), with a small percentage walking or taking public transportation to food distribution sites. Nearly half (47%) of those who accessed food support in the past year reported that transportation was very or somewhat challenging, as compared to 37% who said transportation is not very or not at all challenging when they are accessing food support.

ii. Qualitative Surveys at Food Distribution Pop-up Events

In spring of 2022, Ramsey County contracted Imagine Deliver, a Twin Cities-based consulting firm, to facilitate engagement efforts on behalf of the county with community members who may be experiencing food insecurity. The engagement was facilitated through pop-up events at pre-selected food distribution sites, including: the North St. Paul Food Shelf, the West 7th Street Public Library, a Fare for All food distribution event at St. Stephanus Lutheran Church in Frogtown, Ralph Reeder Food Shelf, Merrick Food Shelf on the East Side, and Focus House in the Midway/Frogtown area.

The six pop-up events were held between June 17-27, engaging a total of 306 respondents in a series of open-ended questions about their current food security needs and suggestions to close the gaps for those needing additional support, including the following five questions:

1. What matters most to you when choosing food for yourself or your family?
2. When you need foods that fit your cultural, dietary, or medical needs, what are the best resources to get what you need?
3. When you or your family don't have enough food, how do you find more food?
4. If you do not currently use county food benefits like SNAP and WIC, are there any reasons why you do not apply for them?
5. If you could dream of better food options in your community 10 years from now, what would that look like?

Respondents were offered a variety of ways to respond, including using a tablet provided by Imagine Deliver, scanning a QR code to access the survey on their own device, or engaging in an interview-style discussion with either an Imagine Deliver or a Ramsey County representative who entered the data into the tablet on their behalf. During data collection, a welcoming and fun atmosphere was generated with lively music, shaded spaces to sit while completing the questionnaire, and on-site researchers who invited individuals to participate and offered any support needed by respondents completing the survey. After the survey was completed, respondents received a \$15 cash incentive for their time and a popsicle. At one location (Fare for All), respondents had an option to take the cash directly into the distribution point and purchase low-cost food with it if they wished (which many respondents did).

Out of this effort, Imagine Deliver identified six insights under three main themes: food autonomy and choice; food affordability and supplemental assistance; and filling gaps in food availability. Each of these is summarized below.

Theme 1. Food Autonomy and Choice

- Access to healthy food builds stronger families and communities, including more offerings of fresh fruits and vegetables, meats, and other nutrient-dense options.
- Localized food production, especially through community gardens, can increase access to fresh foods, support local farmers, and provide communities with more autonomy over the food they eat and its production.

Theme 2. Food Affordability and Supplemental Assistance

- Food costs are rising, most especially for fresh, healthy food, so food budgets do not stretch as far and there is more demand for discounted food programs.
- Access to public food benefits is a challenging and complex system. Community members seek more dynamic, flexible benefits systems that meet their needs.

Theme 3. Filling Gaps in Availability

- Food shelves and other emergency food providers fill gaps in the system when public assistance fails, or individuals cannot or do not want to use these resources.
- Social connections including family, friends, and places of worship also fill gaps in the system and can address challenges like transportation or limited access to kitchens and cooking equipment.

Question 5 asked respondents to share their **vision of better food options in their community** ten years from now. Their responses fell into eight general categories, each of which is described below along with a quote from one or two community respondents that represent the kind of feedback received in each category.

Community Vision 1. Access, including local grocery stores, transportation, and delivery support, especially for the elderly

"Local, fresh, healthy options that are affordable and in a walkable or bikeable community." (White female, age 18-24, zip code 55408)

"More grocery stores and food shelves in my neighborhood" (Black Male, age 35-44, zip code 55104)

Community Vision 2. Homegrown food, healthy fruits and vegetables, public gardens, individual animal husbandry (chickens, pigs), organic food

"10 years from now, I hope that the food has more flavor, not so tasteless like tomatoes. I would like to see farmers markets with fresh food, fresh bread, and flowers every day of the week in every city, and it must be accessible to the disabled." (White Female, age 45-64, zip code 55106)

"Everyone has a garden in backyard and my own chickens, this system isn't going to sustainable, expanding farmers markets, rooftop farming, fruit trees (plum trees, etc.) fruits grown locally, different fruits from different countries, more fishing clubs > taking people to go out to go fishing for their own food." (Black Transgender, age 45-64, zip code 55102)

Community Vision 3. More food shelves, food kitchens

"Place to go like a food kitchen with a good nutritional meal for free or reduced price or a delivery. Could be tied in with a call nurse or assistance program. Could be organized by a donation system based on what you can give. Service for those who also can't cook. Fresh vegetables available." (White Female, age 65+, zip code 55102)

Community Vision 4. Local farmers and better use of farmland

"More farm to table access, less prepackaged, less garbage and junk food, more farmers

market, and fresh foods. Better marketing of nutritional options. Bad when you first enter a grocery store and what you see is junk food. Cheaper and affordable fresh food and produce.” (White Female, age 45-64, zip code N/A)

Community Vision 5. Affordable, more equitable distribution, SNAP more accessible, more school feeding programs

“I truly feel the cost of food is extreme. We barely survive paying for daily essentials and rent. I feel the cost of food should be realistic and not just a high cost for all. We all don't make the same income, so I feel that is not fair. If that can't be, then the income limits for SNAP should be higher.” (Multiracial Female, age 25-34, zip code 55112)

Community Vision 6. Education on food health

“Daily affordable, healthy, and sustainably sourced meals for families, plus snacks for kids. Community gardens, food processing resources, and educational resources for everyone.” (White Female, age 35-44, zip code 55102)

Community Vision 7. Less food waste, less need to steal food

“Food available everywhere so people don't have to steal food.” (Race N/A Male, age 45-64, zip code 55103)

Community Vision 8. Culturally appropriate foods

“More affordable, fresh vegetables, fresh meat. Asians don't eat ground beef.” (Asian Female, age 65+, zip code 55119)

As discussed earlier in this report, data suggested that White residents are more likely to reject the idea that they are food insecure. The data from this community engagement effort also pointed to this trend. In two questions: (*When you need foods that fit your cultural, dietary, or medical needs, what are the best resources to get what you need?* and *If you do not currently use county food benefits like SNAP and WIC, are there any reasons why you do not apply for them?*). White residents were more likely to respond with comments like “Not applicable” or “I don’t need them [public assistance benefits].” In the first question, the only respondents to say this type of response reported their racial identity as White (total of 19 respondents). In the second question, for the 24 individuals who said this type of response, 16 of these respondents identified as White.

Please note that there are a couple of caveats to the data discussed above: first, one of the collection sites in which these latter data were gathered was the West 7th Library. While this site did have a food distribution activity taking place during the data collection process, there was also a children’s reading event taking place that may have attracted visitors not participating in food distribution activities (unlike the other five sites, which were solely focused on food distribution). Second, these data were captured as qualitative, open-ended statements

and then enumerated by a data analyst, a subjective exercise that can misconstrue the data. Therefore, these findings should be considered indicative of a trend also supported by other data points presented in this assessment.

III. Conclusions

Based on all the above inputs, the Food Security Coordinator has determined the following two priorities are areas in which the County can support and guide development:

1. **Urban Agriculture** - facilitating land access and use for local produce and community gardens.
2. **Public Benefits Access and Strengthening the Food Safety Net** - expanding uptake of public assistance benefits among those eligible and interested in receiving assistance; supporting local food shelves and other distribution sites to meet current demand, especially for marginalized populations.

Other key topics, including Enhancing the Food Safety Net, Expanding Food Affordability, Advocacy, Facilitating Informal Connections (i.e., within communities) and Resources/Communications development, are either long-term goals or are happening organically, without county guidance (e.g., through informal connections). Going forward, the Food Security Coordinator will work with the External Governance Team, and an Internal Steering Committee of relevant county staff, to guide these efforts. The participating members of each of these groups are described in more detail below.

Internal Steering Committee is composed of representatives of food security and health service providers within Ramsey County, including WIC, FAS, SHIP, Policy and Planning, Research and Evaluation, and Racial and Health Equity Liaison team members.

External Governance Team is composed of representatives of food security and health service providers outside Ramsey County, including Sanneh Foundation, Fairview HealthEast, Keystone Services, CLUES, Wilder Foundation (Promise Neighborhood), Mt. Olivet Baptist Church Food Shelf, the Department of Indian Works – Interfaith Action team, White Bear Lake Area Food Shelf, Somali Farmers Association, Allina Health and Health Partners.

This foundation will enable Ramsey County to achieve the above short- and long-term goals to address food insecurity over the coming months and years. It will promote a greater sense of collaboration, communication, and consistent messaging across the food system as county residents and service providers recover from the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Appendix A. Data Sources Consulted

Ramsey County Assistance Programs

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Appendix B. Online Survey

The following survey was administered between January and March 2022 via the Survey Monkey online platform to service providers and recipients of food assistance.

FOOD AND BASIC NEEDS ASSESSMENT SURVEY

Ramsey County's Food and Basic Needs program provided assistance for residents in need during the COVID pandemic from August 2020 to December 2020. As the County works to address the ongoing food-related needs in our community, we are asking for your input to better understand your experiences to inform future food-related efforts.

The survey is anonymous. We will not record your name and will only ask general demographic questions. Participation is voluntary and there are no benefits or drawbacks to participating in this survey other than helping to inform future food-related assistance and there are no known risks to participating. The survey should take about 10 minutes to complete.

If you have questions about the survey, you can contact Sarah Auten in the Ramsey County Health and Wellness Administrative Division's Office of Research and Evaluation at sarah.auten@co.ramsey.mn.us

If you would like assistance to translate this survey into another language, please contact the Ramsey County Language Line for interpretation assistance at 651-266-8500.

1. Which best describes you?
 - ☐ I work as a Provider or an organizational representative of a place that provides food or food support.
 - ☐ I have received food or food support in the past 12 months. For example, food from a Food Shelf, School Meal Program, WIC (Women, Infants and Children Program), SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) or other food provider resource. [SKIP to Q. 10]

FOOD SERVICE PROVIDER QUESTIONS

2. Which type of Food Service Provider are you?
 - ☐ Food Shelf
 - ☐ Food Bank
 - ☐ School Meal Program
 - ☐ Representative of WIC (Women, Infants and Children Program), SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) or FAS (Financial Assistance Services)
 - ☐ Food Producer
 - ☐ Other (please specify) _____
 - ☐ None of the above [End survey as respondent is not eligible to participate.]

3. Which of the following Ramsey County zip codes do you represent and/or serve? (Check all that apply or select ALL, if applicable).

- | | |
|-----------------------------|--|
| ☐ 55101 | ☐ 55114 |
| ☐ 55102 | ☐ 55116 |
| ☐ 55103 | ☐ 55117 |
| ☐ 55104 | ☐ 55119 |
| ☐ 55105 | ☐ 55126 |
| ☐ 55106 | ☐ 55127 |
| ☐ 55107 | ☐ 55130 |
| ☐ 55108 | ☐ 55144 |
| ☐ 55109 | ☐ 55155 |
| ☐ 55110 | ☐ We work with residents from ALL areas of Ramsey County |
| ☐ 55112 | ☐ None of the above [End survey as respondent is not eligible to participate.] |
| ☐ 55113 | |

4. Which of the following primary communities do you try to reach? (Check all that apply.)

- ☐ Adults over 65 years old
- ☐ School aged children
- ☐ Families with young children
- ☐ Asian, including Southeast Asian, immigrants
- ☐ African born (e.g., Somali, Ethiopian, Liberian, Eritrean, etc.) immigrants
- ☐ Black, African American, ADOS (American Descendent of Slavery)
- ☐ Hispanic/Latinx
- ☐ Native American/Alaskan Native/Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islanders
- ☐ Residents with limited transportation
- ☐ Undocumented residents
- ☐ Residents with limited English language skills
- ☐ Don't know/prefer not to answer
- ☐ Other (please specify): _____
- ☐ None of the above

5. Over the past three months, what statement best describes Ramsey County residents' need for food support services?

- ☐ Increased a lot
 - ☐ Increased a little
 - ☐ Stayed about the same
 - ☐ Decreased a little
 - ☐ Decreased a lot
 - ☐ Don't know/prefer not to answer
6. What gaps exist that your organization would like to fill, but cannot? (Please include details about specific geographic areas and/or groups who are more vulnerable or whose needs are not being met by the current system.) _____
7. What are the top three (3) projected food-related needs of your organization over the next six months? _____
8. Do you have specific recommendations for policy changes at the state and/or federal level that would enable more effective operations within your organization? _____
9. To which of the following resources have you referred people seeking food assistance in the past three months?
- ☐ Second Harvest Heartland
 - ☐ Ramsey County website for food resources
 - ☐ Ramsey County Service Center Navigators
 - ☐ Ramsey County for SNAP or WIC information
 - ☐ Food shelves or food distribution event information
 - ☐ None of the above
 - ☐ Don't know/prefer not to answer
 - ☐ Other (please specify): _____ [SKIP to Q. 21]

FOOD RECIPIENT QUESTIONS

10. In which Ramsey County zip code do you live? [SAME LIST AS ABOVE] [If none, end survey as respondent is not eligible to participate.]
11. Which of the following food resources have you used in the past 12 months? (check all that apply)
- ☐ Food shelf or food pantry
 - ☐ Food bank (e.g., Second Harvest Heartland, Food Group)
 - ☐ School meal program (when school wasn't in person)
 - ☐ WIC, SNAP, and/or TEFAP benefits
 - ☐ Pop-up food distribution site

- ☐ Other (please specify): _____
- ☐ I have not received food assistance in the past year [End survey as respondent is not eligible to participate.]

Before we learn more about your experiences with food assistance, we would like to ask you to provide some basic information about you and your household. These questions are voluntary and you will not be asked your name, age, or any other identifying information. We appreciate your response to these questions!

12. How many people live in your home, including yourself?

- ☐ 1
- ☐ 2-4
- ☐ 5 or more
- ☐ I prefer not to answer

13. How many children live in your home (under 18 years of age)?

- ☐ 1
- ☐ 2-4
- ☐ 5 or more
- ☐ I prefer not to answer

14. How many seniors (over the age of 65) live in your home, including yourself if you are a senior?

- ☐ 1
- ☐ 2-4
- ☐ 5 or more
- ☐ I prefer not to answer

15. How many individuals with disabilities live in your home, including yourself if you are disabled?

- ☐ 1
- ☐ 2-4
- ☐ 5 or more
- ☐ I prefer not to answer

16. What is your racial and ethnic background? (Check all that apply.)

- ☐ African born (e.g., Somali, Ethiopian, Liberian, Eritrean, etc)
- ☐ Asian or Asian American, including Southeast Asian
- ☐ Black, African American, ADOS (American Descendent of Slavery)
- ☐ Hispanic or Latinx
- ☐ Native American/Alaska Native/Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander

- o White or Caucasian
- o Other (please specify): _____
- o I prefer not to answer

17. How often do you experience these things when you visit a food provider?

	Always	Sometimes	Never	Don't know/prefer not to answer
The process of selecting my food is easy.	☐	☐	☐	☐
I can choose my own food.	☐	☐	☐	☐
There are plenty of different varieties of food available.	☐	☐	☐	☐
The food looks fresh and appealing.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Foods from my culture are available.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Volunteers and/or staff speak my language or can find some way to assist me in my language.	☐	☐	☐	☐
I am able to understand the signs and instructions at the food shelf.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Volunteers and/or staff greet me and make me feel welcome.	☐	☐	☐	☐
There is a comfortable place to wait.	☐	☐	☐	☐
The wait time is reasonable.	☐	☐	☐	☐

Volunteers and/or staff listen to my needs and answer my questions.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Not a lot of paperwork or documentation is required for me to access food.	☐	☐	☐	☐

18. At this time, what is your primary transportation method to get food from a food shelf, free meal program, etc.?

- ☐ Drive or get a ride to pick up food from a distribution point.
- ☐ Take public transportation to pick up food from a distribution point.
- ☐ Walk to pick up food from a distribution point.
- ☐ Have food shelf food or meals delivered to my house from a service.
- ☐ Get food from my child's school.
- ☐ Don't know/prefer not to answer
- ☐ Other (please specify): _____
- ☐ None of the above

19. How challenging is transportation for you (and/or your household) to access food?

- ☐ Very challenging
- ☐ Somewhat challenging
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Not very challenging
- ☐ Not at all challenging
- ☐ Don't know/prefer not to answer

20. How would you like to receive food-related information in the future? (check all that apply)

- ☐ Ramsey County website
- ☐ Ramsey County Navigators (individuals providing information, located in libraries and other County office sites)
- ☐ Word of mouth (friends, neighbors, family members, etc.)
- ☐ Social media
- ☐ General Internet search (Google)
- ☐ Advertising on billboards, print media, television, etc.
- ☐ Don't know/prefer not to answer

- ☐ Other (please specify): _____
- ☐ None of the above

QUESTIONS FOR BOTH TYPES OF RESPONDENTS

21. Please select which three (3) issues are MOST URGENT to address? (Choose three)

- ☐ Not enough food is available at the food shelves to fill the current need.
- ☐ The right type of food is not available to meet cultural or medical needs.
- ☐ Transportation is not available to go to food shelves and bring food home, and delivery is not available.
- ☐ Fresh foods are not available at food shelves or other distribution points.
- ☐ Non-food hygiene items are not available for those in need.
- ☐ Recently hospitalized people or those seeking medical treatment cannot get food.
- ☐ The food shelves are not welcoming or supportive of visitors.
- ☐ Information about food support is not available or people don't know how to access it.

22. What recommendations do you have for Ramsey County to better meet residents' food and basic needs? _____

23. Is there anything else you would like to share? _____

Thank you for participating!

Appendix C. Food Security System

