



# Sonoma County Food Distribution System Assessment

Human Services Department in  
Partnership with Ag Innovations

# Background

In June 2022, the Board of Supervisors allocated resources and tasked the Human Services Department with conducting a countywide food assessment.

Human Services contracted with Ag Innovations to complete the assessment, with the goals of:

- mapping out the food system in Sonoma County
- identifying the needs and gaps in the system
- making recommendations for directing future resources to improve the provision of food in our community



# Acknowledgements

Our sincere thanks to the **Sonoma County Board of Supervisors**, **Ag Innovations**, and the **University of California Cooperative Extension** for their dedication and leadership throughout this project. We would also like acknowledge the **County Advisory Group**, the **Expert Advisory Group**, and **County Departments** for their contributions.



# Contributing Organizations

- California Indian Museum and Cultural Center
- Catholic Charities
- Center for Well-Being
- Ceres Community Project
- Child Parent Institute
- Community Equity Foundation
- COTS
- Council on Aging
- Family Resource Center at John Reed Elementary
- Farm to Fight Hunger
- Farm to Pantry
- Food for All
- Food for Thought
- Heron Shadow
- Indian Health Project
- Jardín del Pueblo (People's Garden)
- La Familia Sana
- La Plaza
- Mendonoma Health Alliance
- Nuestra Comunidad
- Petaluma People Services Center and Petaluma Bounty Farm
- Redwood Empire Food Bank
- River to Coast Children's Services
- Santa Rosa Community Health
- Sonoma County Black Forum
- Sonoma Overnight Support
- Sonoma Valley Catalyst Fund
- Sonoma Valley Unified School District
- The Living Room
- Una Vida
- VOICES Youth Program
- Waves of Compassion
- West County Community Services

# Approach

- Developed an equity screening tool to guide project implementation and align with the Office of Equity's vision, mission, and values
- Organized a County Advisory Group and an Expert Advisory Group to develop the research approach, review preliminary findings, and inform recommendations
- Methods included a literature review, 6 key informant interviews, 25 food distribution provider interviews, and 5 focus group interviews with people experiencing food insecurity and frontline workers

# Literature Review

## Guiding questions:

- What do we know about current levels of food insecurity in Sonoma County?
- What are noteworthy trends?
- What demographics are most impacted (who, where, and why)?
- What external events influence food distribution trends?
- Literature review led us to a focus on certain groups

## Relied on ten studies:

1. **Portrait of Sonoma County**
2. **Annual Sonoma County Hunger Index**
3. Sonoma County Emergency Food Response Gathering
4. Sonoma County Community Health Assessment and Improvement Plan 2023
5. Sonoma Valley Food Security Assessment 2023
6. Cuh:uyaw: Increasing Tribal Family Access to Healthy and Traditional Food Resources Food Sovereignty and Security Assessment Findings
7. Area Aging on Aging Needs Assessment
8. Sonoma County Farmworkers Health Survey 2013-14
9. Kaiser 2022 Community Health Needs Assessment
10. California's Nutrition Safety Net

# Themes From People Experiencing Food Insecurity



- High cost of living is a significant contributor to food insecurity in Sonoma County
- Aspects of the government safety net could improve
- Food distribution locations are not always accessible
- Food choices can continue to improve



# Themes From Food Providers

- Pandemic affected funding and operations
- Challenges to providing convenient, accessible food distribution
- Challenges providing diverse food choices, enough food, healthy food, and prepared food
- Inconsistent, reduced funding leads to waitlists and program uncertainty
- More expert staff is needed, including case managers and dietitians
- Rural and remote communities and neighborhoods of Sonoma County have transportation challenges and feel overlooked
- Information is needed to improve programs



# Participant Ideas for Improvements

- Greater leadership and coordination from the County
- Dedicated County staff to support the food system
- More flexible and reliable funding
- Better sharing of resources and addressing higher-level issues
- Providing land and other resources for growing and storing food
- Address challenges unique to each Supervisorial District

# Recommendations and Strategies

Each broad recommendation includes strategies and specific activities that the county and the community based organizations can take:

- Recommendations for the County of Sonoma
- Recommendations for Community Based Organizations ~~who~~ distribute food



# Recommendations for the County



- County should recognize and elevate its role as a collaborative leader in addressing food and nutrition security
- County should use the strong community support to lead food and nutrition security responses

# Strategies for the County

1. Create a staffing structure to allow the County to become a more effective partner in fostering community food and nutrition security
2. Convene a regular forum and more frequent working groups to share information and best practices, build relationships, and learn across sectors
3. Integrate the food assessment recommendations into the County Strategic Plan and the County General Plan

# Strategies for the County

4. Find new ways to collect and share information and enable data-driven decision-making
5. Increase effectiveness in administering government safety-net food programs
6. Increase the capacity of community-based organizations through direct funding and supporting organizational resiliency



# Recommendations for Community Based Organizations

1. Continue to look for opportunities to colocate food distribution services with other services
2. Continue to focus on providing choice and making food accessible by making it culturally relevant and convenient
3. Add share tables at food distribution sites so people can take or leave items
4. Offer to distribute food before or after work hours
5. Clarify and align nutrition and food distribution goals
6. Train volunteers to support cultural competency when distributing food
7. Work to ensure that school meals can be staffed during breaks
8. Research if/how canned food is used or distributed

# THANK YOU!

