

December 2025

Mat-Su Food Security Assessment







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Purpose and Acknowledgments

Community Science, in partnership with the Mat-Su Health Foundation, conducted an assessment in the fall of 2024 to examine food security and the local food ecosystem from the perspective of residents of the Mat-Su Borough. This report presents key findings, highlights community assets, and identifies opportunities to enhance food security based on the needs and wants of the residents.

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This work would not have been possible without the many community organizations and leaders across the Mat-Su Borough who generously gave their time to recruit participants, host focus groups, and distribute the survey. Most of all, we are thankful to the individuals who shared their experiences, needs, and ideas—whether through the survey or in focus groups. It is your voices—parents, teachers, Tribes, consumers, growers, service providers, nurses, young people, and elders—that we aim to center in this work.

Thank you for trusting us with your stories and insights.

Mat-Su Food Security Assessment at a Glance

Purpose

- Examine food security and the local food ecosystem from the perspective of residents of the Mat-Su Borough.
- Understand what residents need and want to ensure food security.
- Identify opportunities to enhance the food system.

WHAT WE DID
 September – November 2024  552 survey responses  Nine focus groups with 51 people

Key Takeaways from the Assessment

- Community members are deeply concerned about meeting food needs—not just for themselves, but also for their community.
- There is strong community interest in healthy, affordable, and locally sourced food, yet current systems fall short due to high costs, limited distribution infrastructure, seasonal disruptions, and inadequate support for local and subsistence food practices.
- A disconnect exists between preferred and actual food sources, highlighting the need for systems that better align with community values and food traditions.
- Food insecurity challenges are especially acute for aging residents and those with disabilities, who face compounded barriers related to mobility, access, and affordability.
- Even when food is available, the lack of adequate storage, preparation tools, and preservation options limits its usefulness and longevity.
- Food that does not meet health or cultural needs often goes unused, underscoring the importance of culturally appropriate and nutritionally relevant offerings.
- Unstable supply chains, limited home storage capacity, and difficulty navigating food assistance programs reduce residents' ability to consistently access and use nutritious food—calling for more responsive, locally grounded solutions.

How to Respond

- Strengthen pathways to economic mobility connected to the local food system.
- Create opportunities to practice subsistence and preserve the environment.
- Enhance learning opportunities.
- Invest in spaces to connect people.
- Leverage existing access points.
- Simplify access and reduce stigma of using food program benefits.



Introduction

The Mat-Su Health Foundation commissioned this assessment to understand Mat-Su Borough residents' experiences with food security—which is when “all people, at all times, have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.”^{1,2}

The insights from the findings will guide strategies that strengthen the food system for generations of Mat-Su residents.

The food security status of U.S. households spans a continuum from very low to high.³ The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), for example, considers households with very low or low food security to be food insecure, where “a household was unable to acquire adequate food because they had insufficient money and other resources for food.” Food insecurity in the U.S., Alaska, and Mat-Su had been declining with a low near 10% in 2021, though in more recent years there has been a notable and significant increase in food insecurity across the U.S., including Alaska and the Mat-Su Borough.^{4,5} In 2023, food insecurity in Mat-Su had risen to 13.3%, meaning a total of 14,710 Mat-Su residents had to reduce or skip meals.

The USDA has tracked food insecurity since 1991. In September 2025, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) announced they would no longer collect or publish food insecurity data. Therefore, 2023 will be the last nationally available data set until the federal government reinstates the data process or something else replaces it.



These cans of salmon await distribution to anti-hunger network organizations throughout Mat-Su. Photo by Tracy Kalytiak.

Food security for many Alaskans and Mat-Su residents was further compromised by the end of pandemic benefits, a significant state backlog in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) applications, and rising costs for food, housing, transportation, and utilities. Alaska ended its COVID-19 public health emergency declaration in July 2022, ten months before the end of the federal declaration, and pandemic benefits ceased in September 2022. The end of pandemic benefits in Alaska affected sources of food many residents had come to rely on, such as free school meals for all children, enhanced SNAP benefits, and child tax credits.⁶

Then starting around October 2022, the State of Alaska was facing a significant backlog processing applications for SNAP. While states are mandated to process applications within 30 days, the processing time in Alaska had risen to two to four months by 2023, causing disruptions in being able to use these benefits to access food. At the time of writing this report, a federal judge had recently ordered Alaska to speed up processing time for these applications.⁷

During the time when pandemic relief had ended and residents in need were waiting several months for SNAP approval, the costs of food and other necessities were rising. In 2022, inflation reached 8% for urban areas in Alaska, and urban households were spending around 16% of income on food – third in spending after housing (40%) and transportation (21%).⁸ In 2024, while costs for food and beverages rose by 2.2%, costs for rent (5.8%), fuels and utilities (8.1%), electricity (14.3%), and motor fuel (10.9%) rose significantly, which impacts household budgets, reducing resources for food expenses. To further complicate the food landscape at this time, residents were also raising concerns around the



A woman and two children visit the Kids Kupboard space during the Alaska State Fair in Palmer.



State Sen. Shelley Hughes, who represented Palmer and other parts of southern Mat-Su until November 2025, speaks to an audience of more than 130 people who attended her Food Security Workshop. Participants listened to presentations about farming, and then engaged with others in table-top conversations about topics ranging from sourdough making to worms and soil care. Photo by Tracy Kalytiak.

proposed merger of two large grocers — Kroger (Fred Meyer) and Albertsons (Carrs/Safeway) — which had been in negotiation since 2022. Many residents worried it would reduce competition, leading to higher prices and fewer choices.

When households experience severe housing cost burden - that is they spend 50% or more of income on housing - it makes it difficult to afford healthy foods, utilities, or reliable transportation. In Mat-Su, 14% of households are severely housing cost burdened; however, 32.8% of low-income Mat-Su households are severely housing cost burdened. That is the highest percentage among all boroughs, along with Fairbanks (also 32.8%).¹⁰ When households are unable to afford the foods they need, and when this is exacerbated by long processing times for food assistance programs, it impacts the safety network of food banks and pantries. Food Bank of Alaska reported at the end of 2024 that they saw a noticeable increase in requests for food assistance over the past year. In the first quarter of 2025, the federal government made funding cuts to food banks and other food assistance

programs, thus affecting a much-needed food source for those who are food insecure.

In 2020, the Mat-Su Health Foundation added the Healthy Foundations focus area, envisioning that all Mat-Su residents have access to basic needs, such as affordable and accessible food, water, housing, education, employment, health care and places to play. In 2022, the Foundation, in partnership with the Mat-Su Food Coalition and the University of Alaska Fairbanks Matanuska Experiment Farm and Cooperative Extension Service, created the Mat-Su Food System Resource Group to raise awareness of food access needs and to foster community partnerships. This group convenes a variety of community stakeholders every quarter, to share data, discuss policy, and brainstorm ideas. Its members also connect with community organizations through field trips that make it possible to learn more about Mat-Su's food system assets.¹¹

Through the Healthy Foundations focus area, MSHF seeks to understand the complexities of food security for Mat-Su residents and what it

will take to work upstream of food insecurity. Considering the many challenges and threats to food security since the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the complexity, strengths, and instability of the food system in Mat-Su, it was time for deeper inquiry into the food experiences of Mat-Su residents. This assessment was thus initiated to find out Mat-Su residents' concerns, needs, and wants to ensure food security, and to identify opportunities to enhance the food system.

There are additional Mat-Su resources and assessments that expand upon aspects of food security. The Mat-Su Borough Planning & Land

Use Department conducted an assessment called **We All Eat** between 2023 and 2024, to better understand food security and inform an update to the borough-wide Comprehensive Plan (MSB Comprehensive Plan). Information from this current assessment complements information from *We All Eat*, the Mat-Su 2022 Community Health Needs Assessment (CHNA) sponsored by the Mat-Su Health Foundation and Mat-Su Regional Medical Center, and data from Feeding America's **Map the Meal Gap**.

The purpose of this assessment is to attempt to go beyond the numbers and **listen to the**



"Valley residents live in such a fertile place [...] we can see how mass-produced fresh vegetables can be grown distributed/sold."

experiences of residents across the Mat-Su Borough. A truly resilient and sustainable food system requires people in the community to have agency—capacity to exercise voice and make decisions about their food systems that meet their own food needs. By listening to and raising up the needs and desires of the residents of the Mat-Su Borough, this assessment is one meaningful step toward strengthening food security for the Borough, grounded in the experiences and voices of Mat-Su residents. It sheds light on the factors that affect food security in the Mat-Su while uplifting community strengths, values, and assets that reflect the local food system.

Those trying to describe and understand the

extent of food security in any given place often use the pillars of food security – availability, access, utilization, stability, agency, and sustainability (See page 9 describing the pillars of food security). The experiences, concerns, and feedback participants raised during this assessment echo the concepts in these pillars and, moreover, demonstrate the ways

they intersect to tell a nuanced story of food security.

Findings from the assessment show it is not easy to talk about one factor on its own. There is a relationship between costs, transportation, geography, availability, and seasonal variations that affects each of the pillars of food security in different but interconnected ways.



Vegetables are displayed at Matanuska Community Farmers Market.

The findings are organized by the first four pillars (availability, access, utilization, and stability), which are the ones that reflect the greatest part of what we heard from the focus group and survey participants. The discussion portion of this report reflects what the findings mean for the last two pillars – agency and sustainability.

Each section of the findings describes the themes and is followed by a “Call to Action” that briefly summarizes what the respondents asked for to improve their food security.

We hope the experiences, needs, desires, and ideas shared by residents across the areas of food security will help further develop collaborative efforts to create solutions that honor the community, ensuring that all have the food they need and want.



Girls in Knik Tribal Council's homeschool cooking course learn to make bison jerky. They also canned meat in the course. Photo courtesy of Komisa Canady.

¹World Bank Group. (2025). *What is food security?* www.worldbank.org

²United States Department of Agriculture. (2025). *Food security in the U.S.* <https://www.ers.usda.gov>

³United States Department of Agriculture. (2025). *Food security in the U.S. - Measurement.* <https://www.ers.usda.gov>

⁴Rabbitt, M. P., Reed-Jones, M., Hales, L. J., & Burke, M. P. (2024). *Household food security in the United States in 2023.* U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service. <https://doi.org/10.32747/2024.8583175.ers>

⁵Feeding America. (2023). *Hunger & poverty in Alaska [Map the Meal Gap].* <https://www.map.feedingamerica.org>

⁶Wesley, E. (2024, December 27). *A year after record demand, Food Bank of Alaska says need is higher than ever.* KTOO. <https://www.ktoo.org>

⁷Samuels, I. (2025, January 1). *After backlogs, federal judge orders Alaska to speed processing time for food assistance applications.* Anchorage Daily News. <https://www.adn.com>

⁸Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development. (2024, July). *Alaska economic trends: The cost of living.* <https://live.laborstats.alaska.gov>

⁹County Health Rankings. (2021). *Housing cost burden in Mat-Su.* <https://www.countyhealthrankings.org>

¹⁰United States Department of Housing and Urban Development. (2017-2021). *Comprehensive housing affordability strategy (CHAS) data.* <https://www.huduser.gov>

¹¹Past field trips include: Alaska State Fair's Rebarcheck Farm, UAF Matanuska Experiment Farm and Cooperative Extension Service, Point MacKenzie Correctional Farm, Upper Susitna Food Pantry programs, Food Bank of Alaska and Mat-Su Food Bank facilities in Mat-Su, Chickaloon Native Village's lunches for elders, Sen. Shelley Hughes' Mat-Su Food Security Workshop for individuals interested in learning how to grow their own food; Mat-Su Borough School District Nutrition Services, and Palmer Junior Middle School's afterschool cooking club.

The Pillars of Food Security

AVAILABILITY

Refers to the sufficient supply of food, considering both quantity and quality, and is determined by the level of food production, stock levels, and net trade.

ACCESS

Ensures that people have the means to obtain food, whether through production, purchase, or other means, and considers factors like affordability, market access, and infrastructure.

UTILIZATION

Deals with how food is used, including proper preparation, storage, and consumption, as well as ensuring that food is safe and nutritious.

STABILITY

Focuses on the consistency of food security over time, ensuring that people have access to food on a continual and regular basis and are not vulnerable to shocks or disruptions such as seasonal changes or economic downturns.

AGENCY

Individuals and communities have the power to make informed, independent choices about the food they eat. Agency emphasizes dignity, autonomy, and the ability to access food that aligns with personal, cultural, and health needs—without stigma or restriction.

SUSTAINABILITY

Building systems that can reliably provide nutritious, culturally appropriate food now and into the future. Sustainability focuses on long-term resilience through local food production, environmental stewardship, and community-driven solutions that adapt to changing conditions.

Termine, P. (2024). Ensuring food security: Why agency and sustainability matter. *Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)*. <https://www.fao.org>



About the Region: Mat-Su Borough

The Mat-Su Borough is situated on the ancestral lands of the Ahtna and Dena'ina peoples in Southcentral Alaska about 40 miles northeast of Anchorage. Incorporated in 1964, the Mat-Su Borough is Alaska's fastest-growing region, home to more than 115,000 residents across 25,000 square miles. The Borough includes three incorporated cities – Palmer, Wasilla, and Houston; 26 rural/ remote unincorporated communities; and two federally recognized Alaska Native tribes. It is the state's second-most populous borough and third largest by land, characterized by its vast rural landscape, 180+ mountains, 80+ lakes, and multiple city, borough, state and national parks. Deeply influenced by a blend of modern agriculture, Indigenous and tribal cultures, and subsistence traditions, the Borough's close-knit communities take pride in their way of life, and the area attracts both residents and visitors with its natural beauty and outdoor recreation.

The makeup of the Mat-Su is changing. Between 2010 and 2020, the percentage of residents identifying as a race other than white grew from 15% to 22%, with notable increases among multiracial and American Indian/Alaska Native (6.4%) populations. The Borough also has a growing older adult population, with a 72.4% increase in residents aged 60+ from 2012 to 2022. Additionally, Mat-Su is home to 16% of Alaska's veterans, 26% of whom experience a disability—nearly double the rate among the general population of Mat-Su.



A Palmer farmer displays some of the mammoth cabbages for which the Mat-Su region is renowned.. Photo courtesy of Palmer Historical Society.

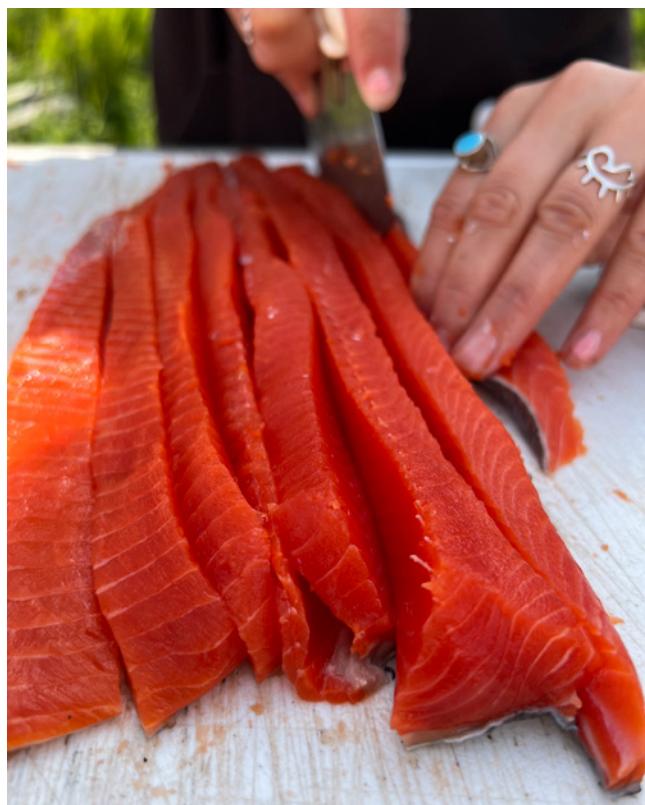
Rich Agricultural History

The history of people and food in the Matanuska and Susitna valleys dates back 10,000 years, during which the Dena'ina and Ahtna Athabascan peoples hunted, fished, and gathered food from the land. They have stewarded the land past, present, and future. Russians and Americans who settled in Alaska in the 19th and 20th centuries significantly impacted Alaska Native peoples and their ways of life.^{12,13,14} New settlers brought new crops and farming practices to the area, new industries and tools, as well as diseases that nearly wiped out local Tribes. Alaska Native villages became formally recognized as Tribes after passage of the 1971 Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act. To learn more about the history of the Dena'ina

Athabascans visit the [Knik Tribe website](#), and to learn more about the Ahtna Athabascans, visit the [Chickaloon Village Traditional Council website](#).

The Great Depression and President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal brought the establishment of the Matanuska Colony in 1935, an experimental resettlement community of more than 200 farming families from the upper Midwest. The Matanuska Colony was the furthest west and furthest north of all the resettlement communities; the conditions were challenging and establishing farms was difficult. Many descendants of the original Colony families remain in the Mat-Su Valley, though most of the farms are no longer in operation. The consistently growing Mat-Su

population places an increasing demand on land, and between 2013 and 2023 the Mat-Su lost 11% of farmland to development.¹⁵ Since 2008, the Alaska Farmland Trust has protected eight farms, a total of 480 acres, through agricultural conservation easements.¹⁶ To learn more about the Matanuska Colony read this [National Parks Service](#) publication or the Palmer Museum [historical photo project](#). Visit the [Alaska Farmland Trust](#) website to learn more about farmland protection.



A woman cuts salmon caught in Cook Inlet by members of a Mat-Su family. Photo courtesy of Lisa Rodgers.

Resourceful and Resilient People

The Mat-Su has faced many challenges in the past several years that have strained the food system, including significant weather events, wildfires, earthquakes, the COVID-19 pandemic,

and rising costs for food. Yet the people of the Mat-Su are both resourceful and resilient and come together in times of hardship. The Mat-Su is home to a vibrant food community, with local farmers, ranchers, fishers, and foragers contributing to a regional food system that blends traditional knowledge with modern agricultural practices.

Additionally, communities have passionately maintained traditional methods of supporting the local food ecosystem through the use of subsistence practices that include fishing, hunting, and gathering of native fruits and vegetables.

The efforts and partner connections from the Mat-Su Food System Resource Group have inspired local, visionary leaders to create change and increase access to affordable, high-quality local food. Some examples include:

- The Upper Susitna Food Pantry nearly a decade ago launched a collaborative summer food backpack program for children in Mat-Su's rural, underserved areas – Talkeetna, Trapper Creek, and the north Willow area. Volunteers pack food, which Church on the Rock Talkeetna stores. Sunshine Transit helps transport the children to Talkeetna Public Library, where they engage in a summer reading program, eat lunch together, and then receive a week's worth of food to bring home. The Upper Susitna Food Pantry also started a program providing food to children on weekends when they cannot eat meals at school; stocks a food pantry inside Susitna Valley Jr./Sr. High School; operates a mobile pantry; and created a collaboration with the

Upper Susitna Senior Center that provides congregate meals for elders and delivers medically tailored food boxes to elders unable to leave their homes.

- Alaska Tilth began at Alaska Pacific University's Kellogg Campus, Spring Creek Farm, as a program that used MSHF grant funds to buy community-supported agriculture (CSA) shares from local farmers and donate that produce to Mat-Su Food Bank, pantries, and for cooking demonstrations done by a SNAPEd instructor housed at UAF Matanuska Experiment Farm and Cooperative Extension Service. Tilth has grown, transforming the program into an outreach that teaches youth how to grow food and adults how to prepare fresh foods; supports expanded growth of food crops by local farmers; and shares Mat-Su's bounty of produce with people who otherwise could not afford to buy it.
- Transportation is a barrier to many Mat-Su children needing food. Mat-Su Food Bank is one organization that provides mobile child-feeding outreach. That organization also provides a collaborative outreach providing food boxes to students at the University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA) Mat-Su College campus, in partnership with MSC Student Government. Kids Kupboard, which began



Palmer Junior Middle School teacher Rebekah Bell shows a boy in her afterschool cooking club how to spread a crust for fruit pizza. Mat-Su Health Foundation provided a grant that funded food and other needs for the club. Photo by Tracy Kalytiak.

in 2015, prepares and transports food to hungry children throughout Mat-Su. Now, the organization is working to establish food-growing education programs at Kids Kupboard's facility in the Wasilla area.

- The Sandwich Project at Palmer High School (PHS) began in 2018 after a student noticed some of her fellow students were not able to eat enough on weekends – when school meals are not available – and prepared meals to package in brown-paper bags that the school nurse distributed. The Sandwich Project now enlists PHS's National Honor Society members and partners with Palmer Lions Club and Palmer UMC Fellowship Church to provide weekend food for children and youth from nearly a dozen schools.

¹²Chickaloon Native Village. (2018). *The history of Chickaloon Native Village*. <https://www.chickaloon-nsn.gov>

¹³National Park Service. (2020). *Alaska's Matanuska Colony*. <https://www.nps.gov>

¹⁴Knik Tribe. (2025). *The Knik Tribe's history*. <https://www.kniktribe.org>

¹⁵Oriol, L.E. (2024). *We All Eat: Leveraging food systems to enhance resilience in the Matanuska-Susitna Borough, Alaska*. Taubman College of Architecture and Planning. <https://www.taubmancollege.umich.edu>

¹⁶Alaska Farmland Trust. (2025). *Protected farmland*. <https://www.akfarmland.com>



Assessment Methodology

This assessment used a mixed-methods approach, including a community survey and focus groups to reach as many people as possible through in-person, electronic, and paper-based formats.

While the findings reflect responses from people across the Borough, we are not implying these perspectives can be generalized to reflect the experiences of everyone in the Borough.

Survey

We distributed a survey between September and November 2024 that residents could fill out on paper or online. The survey consisted of 33 questions, and all respondents could opt out of any of the questions. The survey asked if the respondent was a resident of the Mat-Su Borough. Those who answered "no" were not included. Respondents were only expected to respond to questions that they felt comfortable answering and those that were relevant to them. (See Appendix A for a copy of the survey). To have the broadest reach possible, the survey was distributed during focus groups, at libraries, on bulletin boards (e.g. groceries, cafes, laundromats, post offices), at community organizations (e.g. food pantries, food bank, senior centers, childcare facility), as well as through listservs.

A total of 552 Mat-Su residents responded to the survey. Survey responses came from almost all geographic areas of the Borough.

The majority of survey respondents identified as women (72%), followed by men (12%) and individuals identifying as genderqueer or non-binary (0.5%). Most participants identified as white (66.3%), while 7.5% identified as Alaska Native, and 11% identified as biracial or multiracial.

The proportion of women in the survey is higher than the proportion found in the Borough (48%) and the proportion of people who are white was lower than the proportion found in the Borough (80%). The proportion of 7% Alaska Native in the survey was similar to that found in the Borough (7%), and the same for biracial (8%). (Population data about the Mat-Su Borough come from the Mat-Su



A woman takes notes during a sourdough class offered during the Alaska Homestead Expo by First Colony Farms Alaska's Apryll Walker and her daughter, Meghan Walker. The farm is located in Willow. Photo by Tracy Kalytiak.

2022 Community Health Needs Assessment.

At the time of the survey, 46% of respondents reported being employed full time, and 13% were employed part time. More than one-third of participants were either not in the labor force (36%) or were full-time students (1%). More than one-third (36%) of respondents identified as a person with a disability or chronic condition. Additionally, 8% reported being unemployed due to a disability.

In terms of education, most respondents (77%) reported having some level of college education. Income levels varied, with 64% reporting an annual household income of \$74,999 or less, and 29% reporting an income of \$35,000 or less. (For more details, see Appendix C).

Focus Groups

We held nine in-person focus groups (see Appendix C for locations) across the Mat-Su Borough in September 2024. The focus groups used a semi-structured protocol to gain additional insight regarding food access and security, subsistence¹⁷, and social services, as well as attitudes and ideas participants had about establishing and maintaining a resilient food system within the Mat-Su Borough (See Appendix A for a copy of the focus group protocol).

A total of 51 residents participated in the focus groups. They represented a diverse range of backgrounds and perspectives, such as school and public health nurses, parents, Tribe members, food pantry staff and consumers, coalition members, and other service providers.

For each data collection opportunity, participants were given the option to enter a drawing for a \$50 gift card.



¹⁷ There are different meanings for the ways that people in the Mat-Su use the word “subsistence.” We did not define it and tell people how to use it, but allowed them to interpret as it applies to them in their context.

David Wilson of Wasilla harvests a moose on the Lower Yukon. Many Mat-Su residents hunt and fish - in and outside Mat-Su - to fill their freezers with healthy protein. Photo courtesy of David Wilson.

Analysis and Interpretation

The qualitative data from the close-ended survey questions and the focus groups were thematically analyzed. Quantitative data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics to calculate descriptive statistics for survey responses. We also conducted statistical testing to identify any significant differences in responses based on respondent characteristics. Overall, there were minimal significant differences in responses by characteristics (indicating there were many shared experiences and perspectives among the survey takers), and we note the instances where we found significant differences. The summary statistics from the survey are available in Appendix D.

The research team shared preliminary results of the analysis at a virtual meeting of the Mat-Su Food System Resource Group in January 2025. Group members interpreted and made sense of the data, to ensure the research team accurately described community experiences and solutions. This group includes representation from anti-hunger nonprofits, food policy organizations, Cooperative Extension Service, tribal organizations, public health, school district staff, university faculty, state employees, elected officials, farmers and small businesses. Those attending the January meeting were given an overview of the study’s purpose, methodology, and respondent demographics. Participants were then divided into three breakout rooms to discuss particular themes that arose from the data. Everyone received an information sheet with the full set of preliminary findings.

This ensured participants had a full picture of the study—not just the findings assigned to their breakout group. In the breakout rooms, small groups discussed what stood out to them, what findings confirmed their expectations, the context needed to interpret the data, and any other reflections. After the small group sessions, a representative from each breakout room shared a summary of their discussion with the full group so other participants could then respond or add their thoughts.

Insights generated from these sessions helped ground the data in context; identify concrete, actionable solutions; and identify opportunities for further inquiry, which are presented in the following pages. In the next section we will describe what we learned about food security and the factors that contribute to it.

As you read the findings, please take note: As previously mentioned, the total survey sample included 552 respondents. All questions were optional, so the number of responses varied by question. Most questions received between 400 to 500 responses, though the overall range spanned from 187 to 505. To aid readability, we report findings using both percentages and the number of respondents who selected particular response choices. The percentage is calculated based on the total number of people who responded to the question. For detailed response rates and the total number of respondents for each question, please see Appendix C. Although we cannot be certain why some questions received more responses than others, some of the questions that received the lowest responses seemed to be because they were not applicable to the survey taker.



LouAnne Carroll-Tysdal, executive director of the Upper Susitna Food Pantry near Talkeetna, shows children tomato plants growing in a hydroponic greenhouse she created behind the pantry. Photo courtesy of LouAnne Carroll-Tysdal.

What We Learned

Food security in the Mat-Su Borough

Community members are deeply concerned about meeting food needs—not just for themselves, but also for their community.

The majority of survey respondents are concerned about food security. Among those who responded, 88% (n=495) were either “somewhat” or “very” concerned that people in their community do not have enough to eat (Figure 1). Forty-nine percent (n=504) reported experiencing food insecurity themselves, that is they had to cut the size of their meals or skip meals altogether due to financial constraints at least one month of the year (Figure 2).

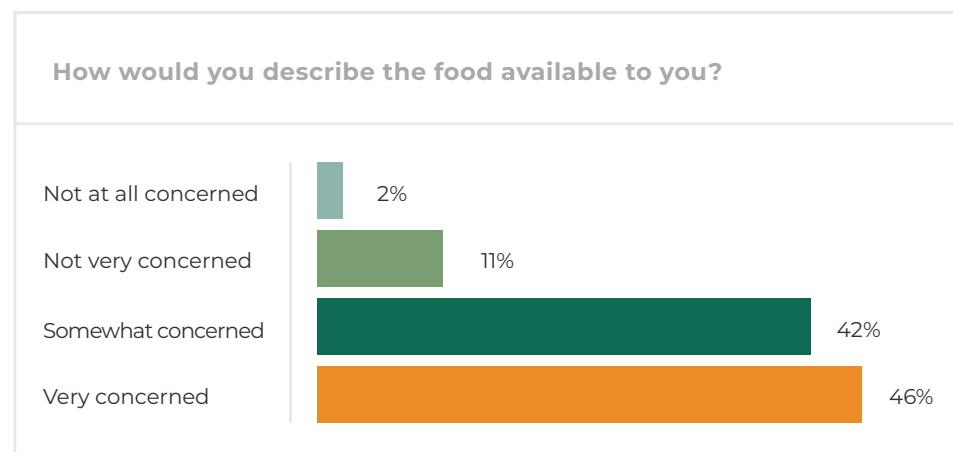


Figure 1.
Concern that fellow residents in the Mat-Su do not have enough to eat

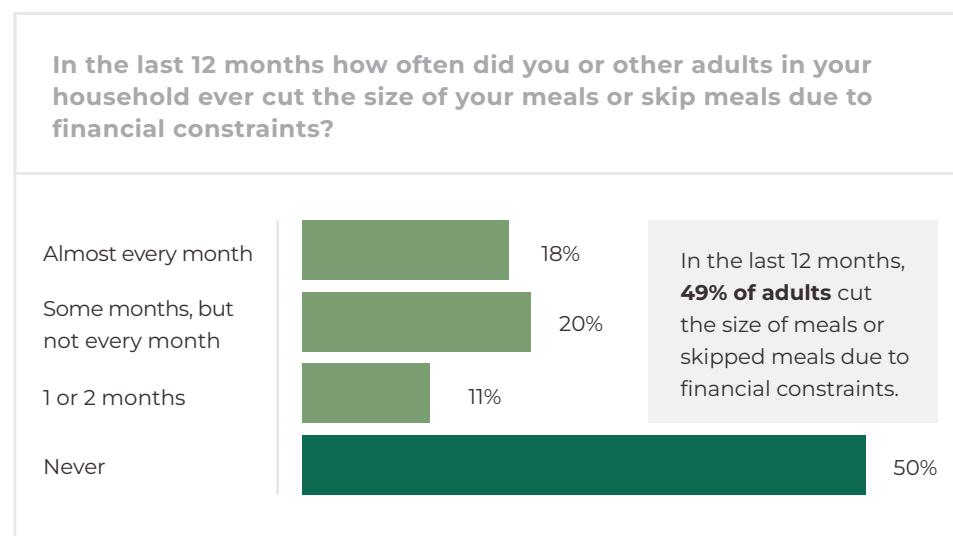


Figure 2.
Impact of financial constraints on cutting or skipping meals in the past 12 months

Both the survey and focus group findings found when families do not have enough to eat it is often because of the high price of food, poor selection or quality of food, distance from food stores, or the season/weather.

Focus group participants described a shared value of self-reliance and independence in meeting their food needs. This was reflected across diverse experiences: from Alaska Native Tribes with longstanding traditions of hunting, fishing, and gathering to feed their communities, to individuals and families who moved to the valleys of Mat-Su to farm and participate in subsistence-based ways of living.

Although the assessment found variations in their experiences, it was clear that survey and focus group participants across the Borough shared **a common call for more high-quality foods that are also affordable**. The findings describe what participants reported about their experience and challenges related to **what is available, how and where they get their food, the dependability of having food day to day, and how they make use of the food that is available and to which they have access**. While there were many commonalities in their experiences, needs, and wants, there were also particular concerns and challenges heard for those who: live in urban vs. rural areas, are aging, have disabilities, and/or belong to Alaska Native communities, which are described further in the findings.

Assets and networks of support for food security exist across the Mat-Su Borough

Mat-Su's communities have shown resilience, awareness, and adaptability in strengthening the area's food security through education and community-driven initiatives. Food pantries, farmers' markets, cooperative agriculture programs, educational outreach programs, and food-sharing networks play a critical role in supporting local food access and sourcing.

Focus group participants brought up local food pantries and food banks, community gardens; educational courses offered through UAF Cooperative Extension Service in Mat-Su; Chickaloon Village elders' lunch and meal delivery; and Matanuska Community Farmers Market (MCFM) in Palmer, which accepts SNAP benefits. Youth-based food programs were also highlighted – Kids Kupboard, the Sandwich Project, and Thrive.

Focus group participants talked of informal networks for sharing information through social media, as well as neighbors, friends and family members who share and/or pick up food for each other. Some mentioned using Connect Mat-Su when they needed referrals for services.



Bushes Bunches, a store in the Lazy Mountain area of Palmer, offers these and other Alaska-produced products, in addition to fresh local produce, proteins, and baked goods. Photo by Tracy Kalytiak.



Availability

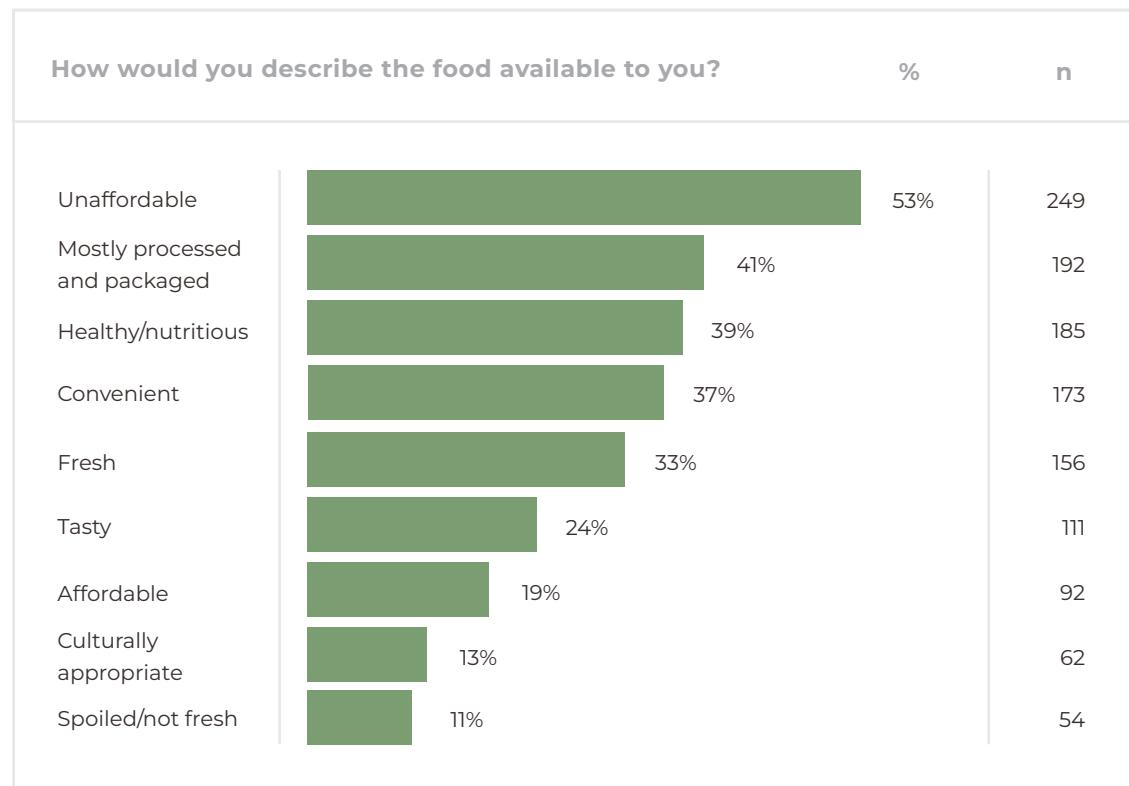
Variety and quality of food available in the region

DEFINING AVAILABILITY:

Availability of food – including variety and quality – is dependent on the “supply side” of the food system - in other words, what residents can choose from to meet their food needs.

There is strong community interest in healthy, affordable, and locally sourced food, yet current systems are not able to realize these interests due to high costs, limited distribution infrastructure, seasonal disruptions, and inadequate support for local and subsistence food practices.

Figure 3. Characteristics of the food available to Mat-Su residents



Number and percent of respondents who selected response options among 472 respondents; total percent will not add up to 100% since respondents could select as many as they wanted.

To highlight characteristics of the food available to residents, survey participants were asked to select from a list as many terms as they wanted that describe the food available to them. The number of times each descriptor was selected is provided in Figure 3.

While a variety of descriptors were selected, the most often selected were “unaffordable,” “mostly processed and packaged,” and “healthy/nutritious.” As the responses show, the food that is available can be both positive – “healthy/nutritious” and challenging to obtain because they are “unaffordable.”

Only 19% (n=92) described the food available to them as “affordable.” Speaking to cost and quality, one resident reported, “food is expensive...and most of what I see in carts are packaged and processed foods.” In the focus groups, participants stated that the logistics of shipping contribute to the increase in the cost of food and the poor quality of food. In some parts of the Borough, full-scale grocery stores are unavailable, requiring people to purchase food from local convenience stores or small markets, which often have limited availability and options.



Mat-Su residents shop at the Bushes Bunches store in the Lazy Mountain area of Palmer. The store offers a venue to local farmers and producers seeking to sell their eggs, meat, baked goods, and fresh fruits and vegetables. It also sells Alaska-made pastas, canned salmon, and other foods. Photo by Tracy Kalytiak.

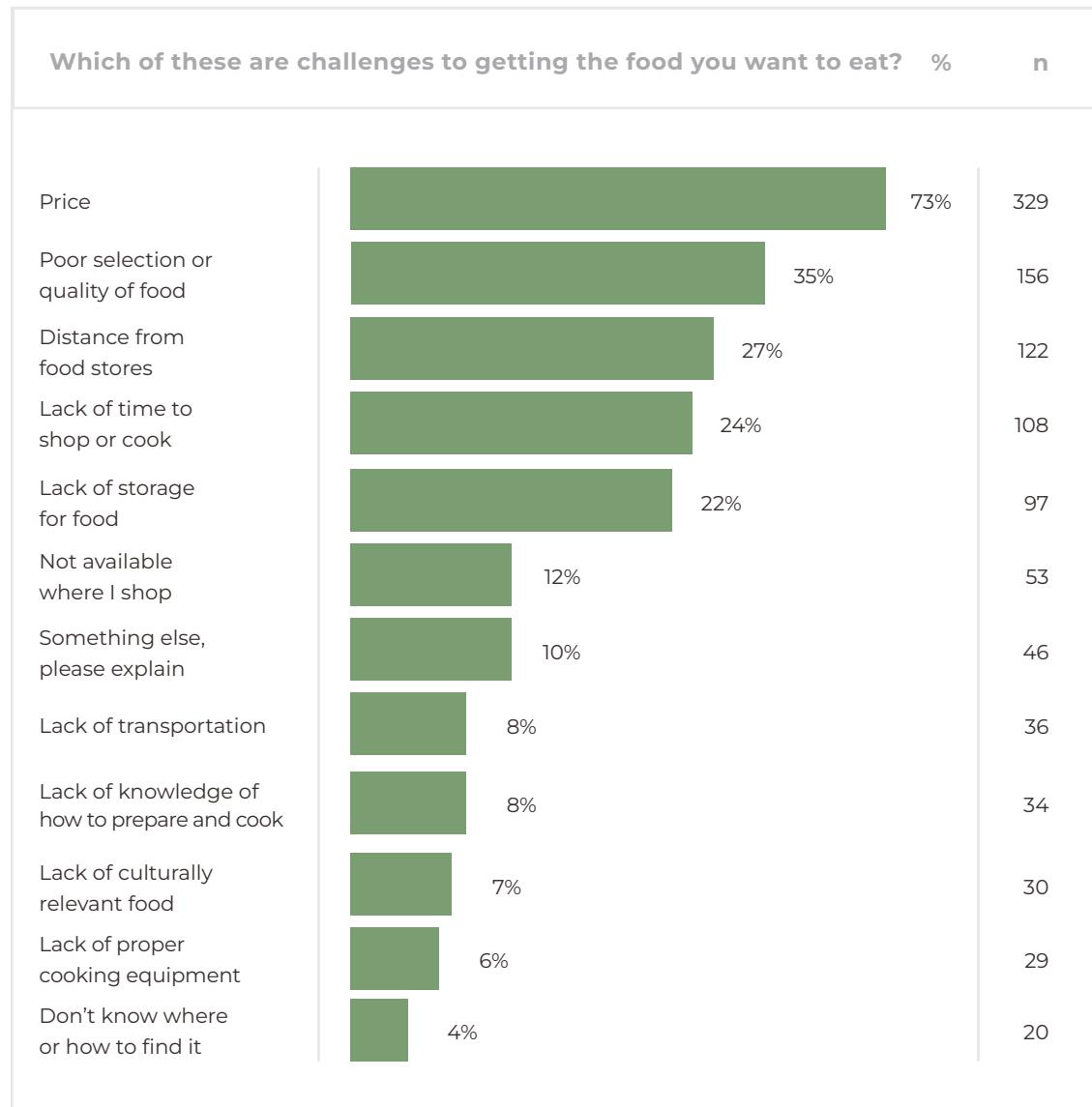


“The valley needs a grocery store with more organic produce and meat options! We need a store like Sprouts or Trader Joe’s or Natural Pantry.”

Across multiple focus groups, participants described the factors that affect distribution to consumer outlets and what it means for the quality of the food available to them. In one focus group it was reported that “because the majority of goods are shipped from outside Alaska, highway closures, port disruptions, or extreme weather can quickly stop the food.” Winter weather conditions can result in disruptions in transporting food. The delays in transporting foods (due to road and weather conditions) can result in lower-quality fresh food, upon delivery and purchase. Thirty-five percent (n=156) of survey respondents reported poor selection or quality of the food available as a challenge to getting the food they need (Figure 4). Nutritious and healthy foods often have a shorter shelf life once they reach their destination due to the time they spend in transit, impacting both quality and nutritional value of the foods consumers purchase. Some survey respondents described the food they found in the food pantries as wilted and expired.



Figure 4. Residents' challenges accessing food they want to eat



Number and percent of respondents who selected response options among 451 respondents; total percent will not add up to 100% since respondents could select as many as they wanted.

A focus group participant said, “Community support around food is important” and suggested to make a communal commercial kitchen available – with a meat grinder and canning system - so that they could process their own foods. It would also allow people to learn from each other – a desire many people expressed across the focus groups.

Although undoubtedly the region does have wild foods available for residents to hunt, fish, and gather, and there are Mat-Su Borough residents who rely on and take pride in traditional food sources, there are still challenges to making this truly available to all who want to participate. Fifty-three percent (n=203) of survey



respondents reported they lack adequate access to subsistence foods. Focus group participants often commented that they were daunted by the prohibitive cost of permits and equipment as well as the cost of gas to travel to the sources of wild food. Members of the Tribes also reported access restrictions and shifting environmental conditions (e.g., declining fish stocks and restricting access to the Yukon River as well as berry picking areas) as threats to relying on subsistence activities. Many focus group participants reported that they do not have adequate processing equipment, refrigeration, freezing, and long-term storage that is needed to support this way of life. Among survey respondents, 22% (n=97) said they have limited access to proper food storage options.

Although moose are available to residents who opt into the roadkill lottery list, focus group participants said to take advantage of this available source of food, it requires the right type of vehicle to transport the animal, skills and tools to process the meat, and facilities to store the meat.

Among focus group participants there was a desire to combine needs around food with needs for an increased sense of community. As one resident put it, **“We used to be able to have**

people come over to share meals and teach each other how to cook meals and we’d trade skillsets. If we had a community, we could do that.”

A small group of the focus group participants noted that policy reform is needed to make it easier for Mat-Su residents to sell their meat, fruits, and veggies in grocery stores – thereby increasing availability of what can be offered to the community. Another small group of focus group participants noted that the region needs to invest in developing the infrastructure (i.e., electricity, running water, roads) needed to grow, preserve, and sell foods by local vendors.

“We have the natural right to forage and hunt for our food.”

What is the call to action from community to improve availability of food?

- Make available healthy and fresh foods also affordable.
- Make permits and transportation to subsistence sources more affordable.
- Increase access to processing equipment and food storage.
- Create opportunities to share food and learn from each other to create community.

Access

Where and how borough residents get their food

DEFINING ACCESS:

Where and how people access the foods that are available in a community depends largely on affordability, transportation, distribution, and buying power – all which make up the “demand side” of the food system.

A disconnect exists between preferred and actual food sources, highlighting the need for systems that better align with community values and food traditions. Food insecurity challenges are especially acute for aging residents and those with disabilities, who face compounded barriers related to mobility, access, and affordability.



Jason Ortiz grills lunch for family and friends outside his home in Palmer. Photo by Tracy Kalytiak.



Nimfa Wadleigh, Mae Grundman, and Rio Brenton, all of Wasilla, display coolers of salmon while fishing in Kasilof. Photo courtesy of Lhing McNeal.

“Yeah, and gardening itself can be a challenge, just like knowing how. There are courses offered, like Cooperative Extension services. And I’ve been gardening and it’s like every year there’s a new challenge. Access to high quality vegetables is a challenge too. Compared to the Lower 48 where you can get fresh vegetables. We have Alaska-grown food, but it’s only for the summer months. During the winter we go through phases where we might not have access to lettuce or other produce.”

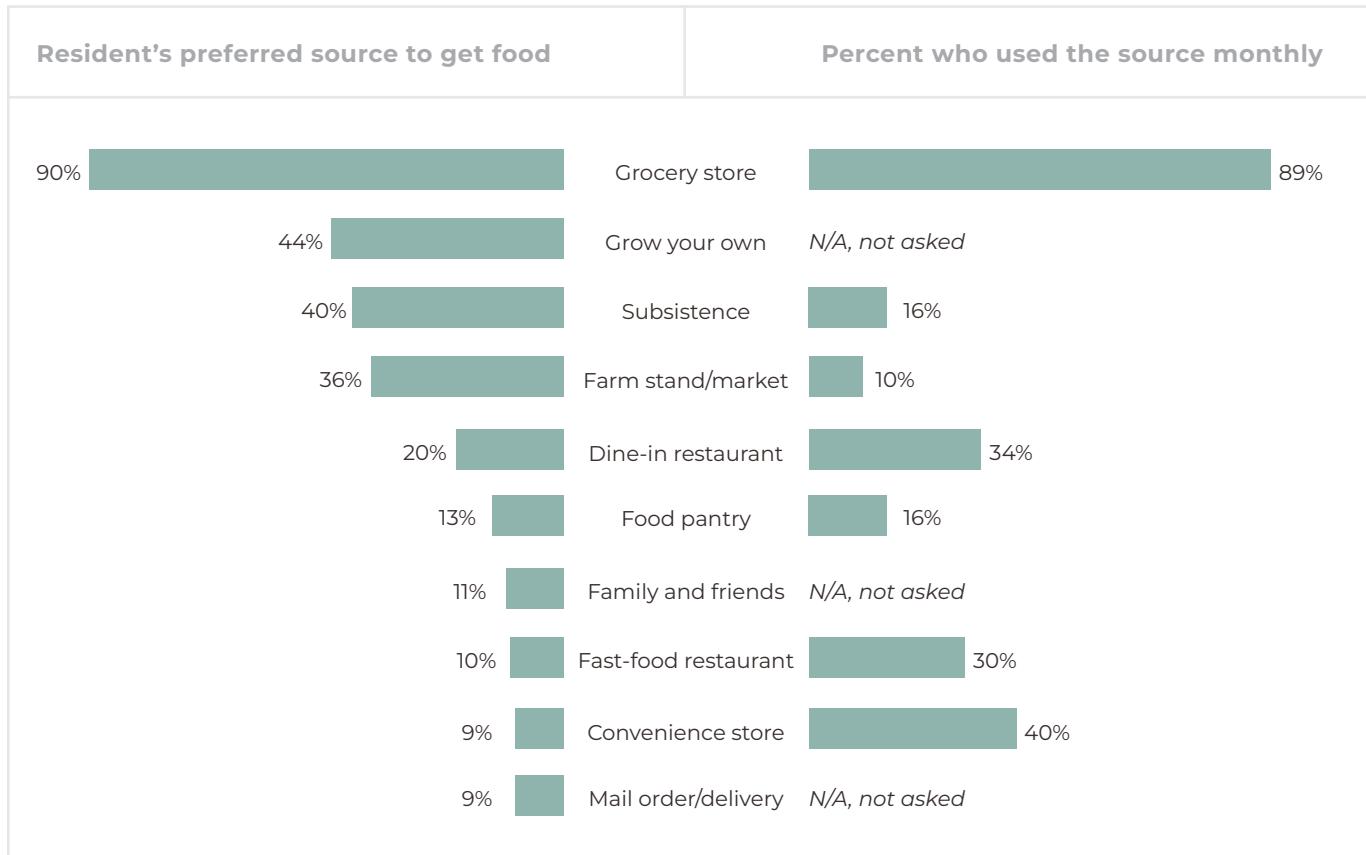
Preferences for Food Access

Survey respondents were asked to select the top three ways they **prefer** to get food (Figure 5).

Grocery store was the top choice by far with 90% selecting it, followed by growing their own and subsistence.

When asked what method they **used** to get their food on a monthly basis during the past 12 months, the top responses were: grocery store 89% (n = 449), convenience store 42% (n = 208), dine-in/full service restaurant 34% (n = 170). Subsistence was reported by 16% (n = 78). Thirty-four percent of respondents had used a food pantry in the past 12 months (16% almost every month, 9% some months, but not every month, and 9% one or two months).

Figure 5. Where residents get food most often and their preferred ways of getting food



These data tell us that participants do get their food from their preferred choice of a grocery store, however, their preference for growing their own and subsistence is not met as often. Meanwhile, only a small percentage prefer convenience stores, but almost half get their food there.

Traditional Foods and Subsistence Practices

A focus group participant spoke about how their traditional indigenous foods are obtained through hunting and fishing, yet accessing these traditional foods has become harder, and eating nontraditional foods is not healthy for their bodies. There was a significant difference in Alaska Natives compared to other racial groups reporting that a lack of culturally relevant food was a challenge in getting the food they wanted ($p < .001$). Among the 25 survey respondents who both 1) indicated that a lack of culturally relevant

foods was a challenge in getting the food that they wanted to eat and 2) provided their location, the majority were located in Wasilla.

There are challenges to subsistence forms of access, and Alaska-grown food and hunted or fished wildlife is challenging to sell in the Mat-Su region due to policies and business practices. For example, in the survey, 53% of respondents reported they did not have adequate access to traditional subsistence foods and 36% never had someone from their household in the past year use subsistence as a source of food. Focus group and open-ended survey responses added that

unregulated tourism and a lack of a community of subsistence practitioners contribute to the ongoing challenges. Regarding policies and business practices, one farmer/producer stated, “if I want to sell meat or chicken I have to pay licensing fees and processing fees and then grocery stores want a lot so I would need to scale up but I can’t afford that.”



Chevy Fernandez cuts salmon from a dipnetting trip during Knik Tribal Council's "Well & Wild" outdoor recreation and subsistence course, as his brother, Jose Fernandez, takes a picture. Photo courtesy of Knik Tribal Council.

Seasons, Transportation, and Geography

The Borough's landscape, seasonal factors, transportation infrastructure, and dispersed population create challenges for accessing food, particularly for those living in remote areas. Focus group participants reported that residents of Mat-Su Borough often travel

significant distances to obtain food. Not only is that a burden on their time, but the cost of fuel to travel to those locations is substantial.

A focus group participant commented on both seasonality and transportation affecting access to foods, stating that there is “less reliable transport due to weather for northern towns.” In focus groups, residents highlighted the absence of a robust public transportation system, while noting the nonprofit bus routes that do exist. **They also highlighted how transportation challenges are experienced at higher rates and/or intensity for those who are aging.** A small number of focus group participants and open-ended survey respondents reported that groups such as **older adults and people with disabilities face unique logistical challenges.** For example, one respondent noted that “some struggle to walk the aisles of large stores,” while others noted the lack of adequate transportation for them to get to the food access points.

Focus group participants talked about the challenges of navigating the urban areas where the food access points are located. Alaska Native participants expressed concern for their Elders driving in these urban areas as well as navigating the more complicated maze of options or technology to purchase foods. While ride-share options do exist and there is online purchasing, both rely on access to smartphones and understanding the technology to use them effectively.

Key Food Access Points

Residents spoke about their use of food pantries and community meals, including the benefits they receive beyond the food. A focus group

participant explained, “The feedback that I hear is that people like getting food that way. And their philosophy is that it’s a gathering place to bring people together. So as people talk and have dinner, someone may express a need and someone at the table may have the ability to meet that need.”

Schools are key access points for food and there are various innovative food-access programs based at the schools. Families rely not just on their child being fed through school-based programs, but also often share the food a child brings home on a Friday among other members of the family through the weekend. If the child cannot make it to school for whatever reason (sickness, weather, transportation, etc.), it means a source of food is unavailable to the child as well as the family.

In terms of going to the grocery store, a focus group participant explained a common strategy is to take advantage of the perks of going in on certain days. “Food waste is a big deal. A lot of times stores will flash sale their meat or produce before it goes bad. They have distress boxes with tons of produce for \$5-\$10. If you have a lot of time on your hands, it’s easy to find deals like that.” On the other hand, taking advantage of sales requires capacity to store it. A survey respondent explained they are “unable to buy extra meat when they are a good price due to not having the freezer space to store large quantities.”

Rising Costs of Food

The prohibitive cost of food means facing tough choices. For example, 92% (n=433) of survey respondents reported that in the last 12 months they have had to change their purchasing habits due to rising food prices. The adjustments they made include changing food brands, cutting out certain foods, buying less food and choosing cheaper, less healthy/nutritious options (Table 1).

Table 1. Changes residents made in response to rising food costs

What changes have you made in response to rising food costs?	%	n
Changing food brands for cheaper options	64%	262
Cutting out certain foods entirely	61%	250
Buying less food overall	59%	244
Choosing cheaper, less healthy/nutritious options	59%	244

*Changes reported for the 433 (92%) respondents who reported making changes to purchasing habits in the last 12 months due to rising food costs.



[bottom] A Palmer Junior Middle School student displays a salad she made during afterschool cooking club. Photo by Tracy Kalytiak.



Planning For the Future

Participants in focus groups with Tribes expressed concern that young people are growing up without learning subsistence skills – a key part of their heritage and staying healthy. In other focus groups, participants talked about the need for skills in planning for food and safety that are relevant to be able to live in the area - skills they felt young people and people new to the region lacked.

Additionally, in focus groups, residents noted their apprehension about grocery stores merging and expressed worry that increased grocery store consolidations could drive up food prices, reduce local food availability, and weaken competition, leading to fewer affordable options while food costs are already increasing.

Resiliency and Solutions for Access

Mat-Su's communities are resilient and resourceful; people show up for one another and create solutions. Focus group participants described how communities have created a patchwork of solutions to bridge gaps in access—neighbors giving rides, meal deliveries to elders, bartering fish or moose, and churches operating food pantries.

A theme among focus group participants was a desire to take advantage of the abundance during growing season by preserving or storing food so that it facilitates access to food during harsher times such as the winter season (i.e., December, January, February, March). This is reflected in the top five solutions survey respondents proposed to gain access to more of the food they need and want (Table 2).

Two-thirds of survey respondents who had never participated in community-based programming to learn about growing, preparing, or preserving food reported they would like to do so (65%, n=268). Very few had attended and/or participated in any community-based programming to learn about purchasing food in the last 12 months. However, among the group who had not, about half (48%, n=198) were interested in doing so. When asked to describe the motivators to participating in learning opportunities, more than half said hands-on educational courses (51%, n=207). Other motivating factors they chose: cost (48%, n=193), having more convenient locations and times (39%, n=158), and better marketing/advertising (37%, n=151) so they would know about the offerings. Moreover, once they had the skills, they would also need the equipment to do the work and store the fruits of their labor (38%, n=153).



[top] Rowena DeRade of Wasilla displays a beautiful salmon. Photo courtesy of Lhing McNeal.

Table 2. Resources to help people access the food they need and want

What would be a helpful resource/support to be able to gain access to more of the food(s) that you need and want?	%	n
A community of people to share growing, harvesting, and preserving responsibilities with	54%	244
Supplies to safely store and preserve foods	48%	217
Education and knowledge on how to safely grow and preserve my own food	44%	196
Supplies and tools to grow my own food	43%	195
Equipment and tools for subsistence	29%	132
Increased access to SNAP/WIC/ATAP/FDPIR benefits (i.e., Food stamps)	29%	129
Land and space to grow my own food	29%	129
Increased access to local pantries	20%	90
Food delivery services to the place I live	16%	74
Public transportation to a market or store	16%	74
Something else*	13%	53

**Something else responses included reducing the cost/financial burden, increasing food storage and processing options, increasing access to subsistence forms of food, money, less government and regulations, transportation, higher quality foods.*



What is the call to action from community to increase access?

Create learning opportunities for:

- Growing, preparing, and preserving food
- Foraging, hunting, and fishing

Make it easier to access foods locally so that the residents from rural areas, with disabilities, and who are aging do not have to go to urban areas to access food.

Increase access to equipment for:

- Growing, preparing, preserving foods
- Foraging, hunting, and fishing

[top] Teens gather fruit at an orchard tended through a Knik Tribal Council program. Photo courtesy of Knik Tribal Council. [middle] Strips of salmon are preserved via drying. Photo courtesy of Lisa Rodgers. [bottom] A Mat-Su child picks produce at Pyrah's Pioneer Peak Farm. Photo by Tracy Kalytiak.



Utilization

Ability to make use of the food available

DEFINING UTILIZATION:

Being able to make use of food is related to having the means to safely store and prepare it, and for it to be appropriate for an individual's dietary needs.

Even when food is available, the lack of adequate storage, preparation tools, and preservation options limits its usefulness and longevity. Food that does not meet health or cultural needs often goes unused, underscoring the importance of culturally appropriate and nutritionally relevant offerings.

One focus group participant noted that while her family does participate in a subsistence lifestyle and was able to “get a moose recently,” this is because they are able to financially afford expensive equipment to go hunting, but “a lot of folks don’t have the resources to go.”

Food storage directly influences food quality, impacting both nutritional value and safety. Without proper storage conditions or skills and tools to preserve food, fresh foods deteriorate quickly, reducing their nutritional content and shelf life, increasing the risk of foodborne illness.

Given the fluctuation in food availability due to seasonal factors and transportation constraints, as well as rising costs, being able to preserve and store food is a critical component of maintaining food security in Mat-Su. Focus group participants talked about wanting to make use of the abundance of food available in the summer through the winter months. Preservation techniques for locally sourced foods through subsistence practices also are necessary for reliance on subsistence. Some focus group participants said they didn’t have the knowledge to process and preserve foods. This may be one factor in why only 38% (n=155) of respondents indicated some of their food is hunted or fished by their households.

Survey participants reported that even if they were to engage in hunting, fishing, or growing, they would have limited equipment and infrastructure to store food (48%, n=217). Needs include refrigerators and greenhouses. A focus group participant noted, “possession of outdated refrigerators makes it hard to preserve fresh foods for more than a day.” Another said, “We have to save up for things too, like a bigger greenhouse, bigger storage space, and so on. Buying those things is expensive. And it's work to grow your own food; like another full-time job.”

Preparing salmon for canning is a culinary art. Photo courtesy of Lisa Rodgers.

Making use of the food that is available cannot happen when the food is not meeting their medical or dietary needs, as reported by 40% (n=202) of survey respondents, or not being culturally appropriate, as reported by 7% of respondents (n=30).



A woman prepares salmon for canning; her daughter and grandchildren - who are Mat-Su residents - caught the salmon in Cook Inlet, off the Kenai Peninsula. Photo courtesy of Lisa Rodgers.

“Variability would be another thing. Some days or weeks, or times of the month I know I have to wait for the food that I want. Stuff goes pretty quick, so you have to see what's left.”

What is the call to action from community to be better able to use foods?

- Increase availability of foods that meet dietary and cultural needs.
- Increase access to equipment and space for storing and preserving food.
- Creating learning opportunities for canning, freezing, drying, and other techniques for preserving food.
- Increase access to root cellars, cold storage, and shared-use kitchens.

Stability

Dependability of having food day to day

DEFINING STABILITY:

In order for people to have a sense of stability or dependability on having food from one day to the next regardless of fluctuations in the environment, it means they can rely on food sources to be available, accessible, and usable.

Unstable supply chains, limited home-storage capacity, and difficulty navigating food assistance programs reduce residents' ability to consistently access and use nutritious food—calling for more responsive, locally grounded solutions.

Survey respondents noted that the summer months – June, July, August, and September – are the months when it is easiest to get food, especially healthy and nutritious foods. In the focus groups and sense-making sessions, participants mentioned these months can be

easy because Alaskans grow a lot of food during those months; weather doesn't impact the supply and distribution chain; and individuals can travel farther and with less difficulty because the roads are clear.

The Mat-Su Borough depends upon supply chain logistics to meet its food needs. Transportation, weather, fuel costs, and policies can affect the supply chain. Challenges in these factors can lead to a lack of inventory in stores; contribute to inconsistent availability of some food items; and increase food prices, further exacerbating food security concerns throughout the Borough, especially during winter months.

- people who may lack reliable transportation or the financial safety net to manage as availability of affordable food fluctuates, according to a small group of focus group participants and open-ended survey respondents.

Economic challenges are particularly of concern during the Borough's long winter season. In focus groups, residents talked about the cost of heating and having to decide between paying for heating

"I try to stock up but when snowed in and missing work to pay for utilities and mortgage first it becomes an issue."

When a region's entire food supply chain depends on a few vulnerable transportation routes, even brief disruptions can leave households unable to afford or obtain nutritious foods. These factors especially increase risk for those on fixed incomes or facing mobility issues

fuel and paying for food. Survey respondents reported that during winter months, particularly December, January, February, and March, a lack of food security is higher (Figure 6). Almost half (45%) of survey respondents chose "cost" (Figure 7) as the reason for not having enough food.

Fewer Mat-Su residents report being able to have enough of the food they need and want between December - March

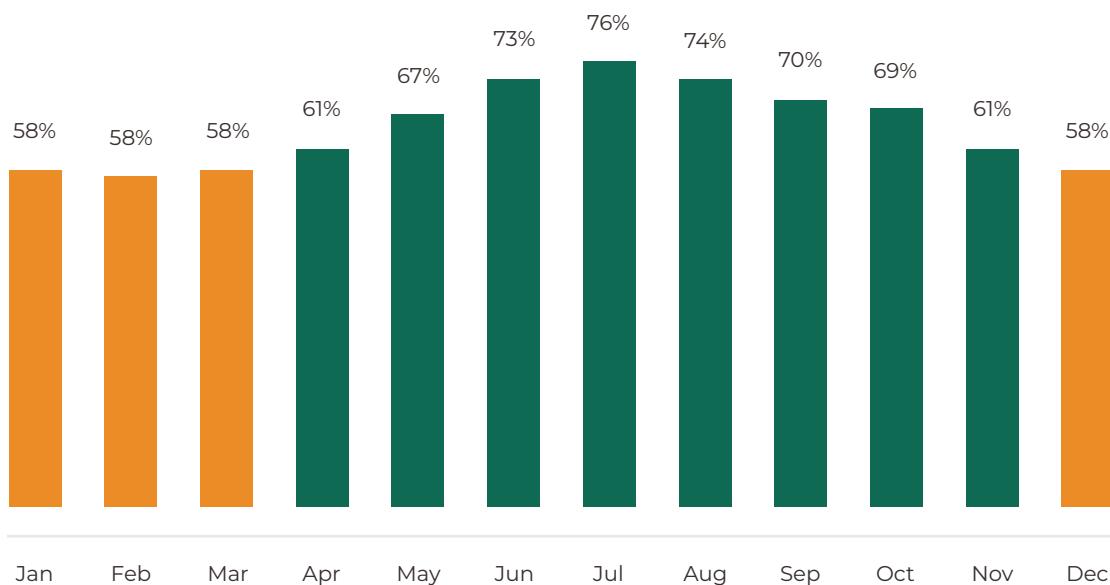
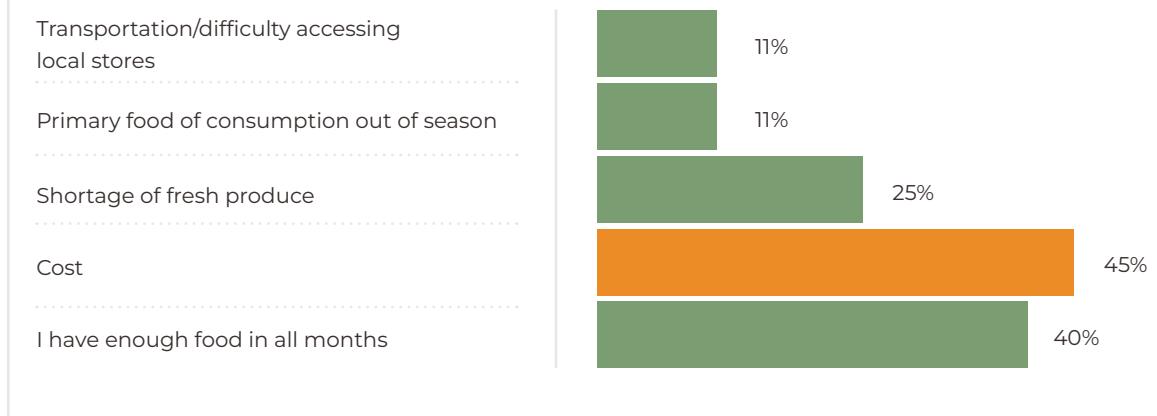


Figure 6.
Percent of respondents who report having enough food by month of the year

Figure 7.
Reasons for not having enough food throughout the year



Responses were select all that apply, unless someone selected "I have enough food in all months" then no other responses could be selected.

These challenges have required Mat-Su Borough residents and households to make difficult trade-offs—such as cutting back on meal sizes, skipping meals, or substituting lower-cost, less-nutritious alternatives and brands in place of healthier options. The reason for not having enough food that almost half (45%) of survey respondents chose was “cost.”

Federal, state, and local programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP); the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC); and the Alaska Temporary Assistance Program (ATAP), along with local food pantries, provide support to stabilize food security. Among survey respondents, 17% (n = 69) reported connecting to federal and state food assistance programs for support. Among the 170 respondents who said they used a food pantry, 48% (n = 74) said they visited the pantry monthly, and 18% (n = 28) said weekly.

Designed to provide critical support in addressing food security across the nation,

these governmental benefits have not been as accessible for the participants of the assessment. Lengthy and complex application procedures, as well as extended wait times often create barriers for those most in need. Delays and backlogs in processing benefit applications leave many without access to these benefits for prolonged periods of time. Some survey participants reported they would like to receive benefits but do not meet eligibility requirements. The limited number of retailers that accept food assistance benefits in certain areas restricts residents’ ability to use these resources effectively. These challenges can discourage eligible individuals from applying for or using these programs, leaving many without critical support for food security.

More survey participants reported accessing food pantries in comparison to free or reduced lunch in school-based programs, SNAP, WIC, ATAP, or the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR). Half of survey takers who accessed food pantries go at least every month. The food pantries, however, cannot be

relied upon as the sole source of meeting food needs. Among users of food pantries, 53% said it met “some” of their needs, while only 9% said their needs were met “completely” by food pantries.

According to both the survey and focus groups, if residents did try to access SNAP, WIC, ATAP, or the FDPIR, they experienced barriers such as long wait times for approval of benefits and difficulty applying or reapplying for benefits. Among those who did secure benefits, some are reluctant to use them because of stigma or feeling judged, and when they do use these benefits, the benefits

are not sufficient to support the household. As one focus group participant recalled, “I entered into the grocery store and there were no signs about taking SNAP and I was embarrassed to ask the cashier because then they’d know and tell others.” Some residents (27% of survey respondents) reported experiencing stigma associated with using food-assistance programs and explained how it remains a significant deterrent to accessing those benefits. This stigma can perpetuate food insecurity by preventing individuals from using the supports and resources available to them, despite the need.

SNAP BENEFITS HALTED IN LATE 2025

“We recently received SNAP benefits. Without them we would be struggling to have enough food.”

In late November 2025, as this assessment neared publication, approximately 12,000 SNAP-receiving Mat-Su residents experienced a halt to their SNAP benefits due to a then-month-long government shutdown. As Mat-Su residents waited for their benefits, the governor signed an emergency declaration; MSHF allocated \$250,000 for relief, divided among six organizations that included Mat-Su Food Bank, three pantries, and two federally qualified health centers; and the federal government released half of recipients’ benefits as the State tried to figure out how to reconfigure its system to channel State funds rather than the customary federal SNAP funds. SNAP recipients and additional people caught in Alaska’s SNAP backlog who were not getting benefits each needed to go to food pantries for help.

In the focus groups, participants said a combination of public education and clearer advertising from businesses can help increase the use of food-assistance programs. They said the public needs to be educated on the use of food-assistance programs, to reduce the shame and stigma. One resident stated, “we all have a right to these programs and we all need help from time to time. People

need to know that because I’m using [food assistance programs] doesn’t mean I’m any less than them.” Participants further highlighted that normalizing assistance — whether from churches, food banks, or government agencies — is crucial because stigma and a sense of pride often prevent struggling families or seniors from seeking help. Advertising by the businesses about what can be purchased with the food

assistance vouchers would be helpful, so people know where to go and what to purchase. One individual reported, “some stores have a SNAP logo on the price so you know what qualifies. Other, more local stores, don’t even have a sticker on their front door saying they accept SNAP. Having these signs would be helpful to know where you can go and what you can buy.” Specific to food pantries, survey respondents reported they could be improved by increasing the types of food available, increasing the hours of operation, reducing the stigma associated with using a pantry, increasing the portion/size of the food available, and having more or centralized locations.

While food pantries and community-based food assistance programs serve as a critical safety net for Mat-Su Borough residents facing instability, these programs frequently operate under restricted funding and inconsistent food donations—with limited resources and staff—struggling to meet the increasing demand.

What is the call to action from community to increase stability?

- Increase pathways for economic independence.
- Improve capacity for readiness during disasters or emergencies.
- Make it easier and less stigmatizing to use benefits.
- Improve food pantries to better meet needs.
- Increase access to food preservation and storage.



[top] A child and her mother talk with volunteers as they pick up food during the Talkeetna Public Library's summer reading, lunch, and food “backpack” program. [middle] Upper Susitna Food Pantry coordinates the outreach (etc.) [bottom] LouAnne Carroll-Tysdal shows plants that she hydroponically grows behind the pantry. Photo by Tracy Kalytiak.



Discussion

The findings point to promising strengths the community can build upon.

Assessment participants expressed interest in growing their own food, learning food preparation and preservation skills, and participating in communal food-sharing networks. While these strategies alone cannot address systemic challenges like inflation or limited transportation infrastructure, they reveal where momentum already exists—and where targeted investment and coordination could amplify impact.

Across focus groups and surveys, we heard a strong sense of self-reliance, pride in subsistence traditions, and a growing collective interest in developing a stronger, more local food ecosystem in the Mat-Su Borough. Food security here is not just about having enough to eat—it's about having the right kinds of food and the agency to shape one's food future. It is also about the dignity to access support without stigma.

Interconnected cultural, environmental, economic, and logistical factors shape food security in Mat-Su. Residents navigate a complex system impacted by rising costs, seasonal limitations, weather disruptions, storage constraints, and long distances between communities and food sources.



[top] People browse at Willow Community Food Pantry. *[middle]* Amelia Raisanen shows her pig, Peaches, at the Alaska State Fair. Photo by Roman Kalytiak. *[bottom]* Robin Smith, who owns The Quail Life with his wife, Jenna, holds one of his birds at the Alaska Homestead Expo event in Wasilla. Quail lay eggs year-round and can be kept indoors in winter. The Expo attracted hundreds of people interested in learning how to improve their food security as well as connecting with vendors who could meet their needs. Photo by Tracy Kalytiak.

The pillars of food security—availability, access, utilization, and stability—cannot be addressed in isolation. For example, wild foods like berries, moose, and fish may be technically available, but barriers in access (permits, fuel, knowledge) or utilization (processing tools, storage) limit their reliability. Without the ability to preserve these resources, their availability doesn't translate into food security.

Respondents emphasized that while food may be physically present—on shelves or in food pantries—it often is not food they can use. It may be overly processed, misaligned with dietary or cultural needs, or lack freshness. Many described frustrations with systems that offer few meaningful choices and do not reflect their values or needs. These experiences underscore a system that restricts autonomy and undermines health and well-being.

Across the Borough, participants consistently pointed to a handful of priorities that could improve food security across multiple dimensions—knowledge, tools, and storage. These were not long lists of demands, but clear and recurring calls to action with broad benefits.

To move toward a food system that centers dignity and sustainability, solutions must be community-led—giving residents the tools, resources, and power to make their own food choices. This includes improving access to fresh and whole foods, supporting culturally relevant food practices and traditions, and expanding opportunities to grow, harvest, and preserve food locally.

Sustainability means reducing dependency on fragile supply chains that are vulnerable to weather and national disruptions. It also



[top right] Youth work at a community garden project that Upper Susitna Food Pantry coordinates, adjacent to Church on the Rock Talkeetna. Photo courtesy of LouAnne Carroll-Tysdal. [bottom right] A Mat-Su resident's mother tends to salmon her family caught in Cook Inlet. Photo courtesy of Lisa Rodgers. [left] A Mat-Su resident stands by a moose he harvested on the Tanana River. Photo courtesy of David Wilson.

means strengthening local capacity through infrastructure, education, and partnerships rooted in traditional knowledge—particularly among Alaska Native communities.

Sustainability is not just environmental—it is also cultural, economic, and social.

A sustainable food system in Mat-Su requires investment in infrastructure that supports local growing, processing, preserving, and consumption. It means lowering barriers to subsistence practices and safeguarding land and waterways for future generations while honoring those who care for them today. It also means

building systems that can withstand seasonal, economic, and global shocks—so residents are not forced to choose between heating fuel and healthy meals.

Ultimately, a sustainable food future for the Mat-Su Borough includes good jobs in local agriculture, commercial and subsistence fishing, and food processing and storage. It values the traditional knowledge already sustaining communities—and ensures younger generations have the support to carry these skills forward.



How to Respond

These assessment findings offer a window into what residents of the Mat-Su Borough need and want when it comes to food security.

Going forward, it will be necessary to better understand **what** approaches are most likely to work and **who** is best positioned to lead each effort. This will require directing efforts toward ongoing engagement and collaboration with members of the community and additional information gathering.

In terms of **how** to approach the work ahead, the most important point is to continue to center **community voices, lived realities, and knowledge**—to ensure that all solutions are place-based and community-led. Part of the ongoing work is to consider whose **voices still need to be heard** and find opportunities to engage. For example, expanding this assessment to include more youth and young people could reveal whether they have similar or different priorities, especially around learning subsistence skills or preparing culturally meaningful meals, and their impact on the food system. Exploring the experiences of farm workers, producers, and those involved in food distribution will also help ground next steps in the lived realities of those working across the system.

Recognizing the survey reached a higher proportion of women within the community, it is also important to consider avenues and opportunities to further explore the experiences and perspectives of men and others who may interact with the food system differently, whether at home or in the community. Furthermore, any future efforts must continue to intentionally elevate the voices and realities of Alaska Natives.

Gaps in understanding that could guide future inquiry should be prioritized. For instance: What are the opportunities to increase local food production in the face of shifting population and environmental factors in Mat-Su? What barriers do food retailers face in offering more affordable and diverse options? What would it take to expand shared-use kitchens, community storage, or mobile markets to more remote areas of the Borough? And what types of policies—local or statewide—could ease the increasing burden of food costs and incentivize stronger partnerships between government, producers, and consumers?

The following are six potential actions to take in response to what the participants called for. However, it will be necessary to identify capabilities, available partnerships, and time available to guide how and when to take action.

Strengthen pathways to economic mobility connected to the local food system

Many residents shared that the cost of food—alongside housing, fuel, and transportation—makes it hard to prioritize healthy eating. One way to address this is by expanding opportunities for jobs, income generation, and entrepreneurship connected to the local food system. The next step could include engaging residents to understand what types of food- or land-based work they are interested in and what barriers they face (e.g., tools, childcare, transportation, business knowledge). From there, partners could explore strategies such as micro-grants, cooperative models, paid apprenticeships, and training programs. Support should also acknowledge and build on existing skills as assets that can play a key role in building an infrastructure for economic mobility.



People shop at a fall market day at Matanuska Community Farmers Market.



Alaska-made products are displayed at the Workshop for Food Security. Photos by Tracy Kalytiak.

Create opportunities to practice subsistence and preserve the environment

The meaning and significance of subsistence can vary depending on individual's regional context and experiences. While the word subsistence was used in the survey and focus group questioning, it was not explicitly defined. Participants spoke about it from their own perspective and experiences and the challenges and desires to practice subsistence emerged as an important topic. To respond meaningfully to the challenges that were raised in practicing this form of food access, it will be important to continue to learn about the contexts in which residents face challenges and want to see change. Based on what participants said, this may involve developing initiatives to make permits and transportation to subsistence sources more affordable – either by offsetting those costs or reducing the price of permits and equipment. It also may be about making tools, equipment, and storage more accessible. As more people are able to practice subsistence, it will also be important to sustain this form of food access by protecting the water and land in which wild foods are found.

Enhance learning opportunities

While programs offered by the Cooperative Extension and other organizations already exist, there is a clear opportunity to strengthen and tailor these resources to meet local needs. The next step could involve engaging community members to better understand the barriers and suggestions they talked about. With that information, programs could be adjusted and



[top] Picking wild blueberries is a favorite fall activity in Mat-Su.
[bottom] Apryll Walker and her daughter, Meghan Walker, teach a sourdough-making class at the Alaska Homestead Expo in Wasilla. Photo by Tracy Kalytiak.



People attending the Alaska Homestead Expo near Wasilla learn about Chugach Farm from its co-owner, Allie Barker. Photo by Tracy Kalytiak.

expanded to meet the cost-point, timing, and formats that residents would participate in. Community members with skills and experience could be identified to serve as local teachers or mentors, and Alaska Native residents could share their knowledge about the land and subsistence forms of food access.

Invest in spaces to connect people

Investing in spaces, programs, and policies that help people connect—whether through neighborhood gardens, shared kitchens, or peer-led cooking circles—can make food more available, more affordable, and more meaningful. These are practical ways to address food insecurity by tapping into the strengths and desires people already have.

Leverage existing access points

Focus group participants consistently highlighted schools as a critical access point for food—particularly for children, but also as a potential resource for the broader community. In addition to school meals, some communities already participate in innovative programs such

as the Sandwich Project. There is an opportunity to expand school-based food access to reach adults and families, not just students—for example, through evening meal programs, school-based food boxes, or community dinners.

Simplify access and reduce stigma of using food program benefits

Participants recommended a range of improvements to make food access programs more effective, welcoming, and locally relevant. Ways to respond can include advocating for simplifying administrative processes for benefit applications and renewals and refining the operations of food pantries; collaborating with trusted community leaders to normalize use of and change the narrative around social services; and encouraging enrollment without shame or judgment. Tangible actions can include improving signage and other indicators for what foods qualify to be purchased with SNAP and building upon the use of food access spaces as places of connection—not just service—where people can gather, share stories, and support one another, blending efficiency with a deeper sense of community.



Appendix A

Data Collection: Focus Group Protocol

Focus Group Protocol

Larger Topic Area	Main and Probing Questions
Access to Food and Barriers - General	<p><u>Main question:</u> We want to understand the Mat-Su resident experience. With that in mind, we would like to know for those who live in the Mat-Su Borough, what influences their food shopping behaviors and the way they access food?</p> <p><u>Probing Questions:</u> What about your region or where you live or your living situation has changed and impacted the way you buy or access food? What influence do local laws or social norms play in your shopping behaviors or how you access food? How does the cost of living impact your grocery shopping behaviors and access to food? How does the time of the year (months or season) influence your behavior or access to food? How do natural disasters (weather, fire, bridge closures, etc.) impact your shopping behaviors or modes of getting access to food?</p>
Access to Food and Barriers - Subsistence	<p><u>Main Questions:</u> What impacts your ability to practice and maintain the practice of subsistence food access (e.g., gardening, foraging, hunting, fishing)?</p> <p><u>Probing Questions:</u> Do you have what you need to engage in subsistence food access to the extent that you want to? What happens after you catch your bounty: How do you process and store the food? Do you face any challenges with processing and storage? What rules or laws have impacted your experience engaging in subsistence food access? How does the allocation of subsistence food access occur? Who is involved? If it is not allocated, why not?</p>
Social Services and Access to Social Services	<p><i>For those selling or distributing food:</i></p> <p><u>Main Question:</u> From your perspective, what role do social service benefits play in helping your customers meet their daily food needs?</p> <p><u>Probing Questions:</u> What social norms or laws do you believe influence people's decisions to redeem social service benefits at your establishment or others? How would you describe the extent to which there is an environment that invites people to redeem their social service benefits at that establishment? From your perspective, how many people do you see needing to use sources other than the use of social service benefits to meet their food needs?</p> <p><i>For those using, thinking about using, stopped from using, etc.:</i></p> <p><u>Main Question:</u> What has been your experience with applying for or redeeming social services benefits such as WIC, SNAP, farmers' market vouchers, etc.?</p>

	<p><u>Probing Questions:</u> What influences where you use your benefits? What influences what benefits you use or apply for? What influences why you choose not to engage in the use of social service benefits? How do social norms and legal requirements influence your decision to apply for and redeem social service benefits? If you do use your social service benefits, where do you use them and why do you choose to use them there and not in other places? From your perspective, how many people do you see needing to use both their income and the use of social service benefits to meet their food needs?</p>
<p>Introduction – Defining Food Insecurity/Hardship</p>	<p><u>Main Question:</u> One of the main ideas we want to know more about through all these questions is food security and insecurity – do residents have food, have good food, and enough to eat consistently? Can you help us understand what it looks like when someone or a family is food insecure? Does it mean they never have food? Does it mean they only have food for some days of the week or month? If you feel comfortable, what experiences come to mind?</p> <p><u>Probing Questions:</u> Tell us more about the strengths and tools and tips you use to persevere during such times? Where do you draw strength and resilience from? Where do you draw support from?</p>
<p>Ideation – What Could Be Improved</p>	<p><u>Main Question:</u> Speaking of strengths, when there are disruptions in the food system, what have you seen work well to mend them? To repair them?</p> <p><u>Probing Questions:</u> Who is involved in the decision making? Who benefits? Who does not benefit? What systemic factors contribute to these decisions and outcomes?</p>



Appendix B

Data Collection: Survey Questions



Matanuska-Susitna Borough Food Access Survey

This survey is being conducted by Community Science in partnership with the Mat-Su Health Foundation

You are being asked to answer these questions because you are a resident of the Matanuska-Susitna Borough (Mat-Su). The Mat-Su Health Foundation is conducting this survey to better understand the strengths, challenges, and barriers residents face in accessing the foods they need and want, as well as to identify potential opportunities to improve food access, security, sovereignty, and support within the Mat-Su community.

Confidentiality: Your responses will be confidential, and your name will not be asked. The information collected during this survey will be used to inform policies and programs aimed at improving food access within the Mat-Su community. A summary of responses will be shared with community, regional, and state leaders working to address food access and security and improve the overall health and well-being of Mat-Su residents.

Length: This survey consists of 33 questions focused on food needs and desires, resources and opportunities to access food, and growing food. The survey will be followed by 12 demographic questions.

This survey will be available Monday, September 23 - Friday, November 1, 2024

Want to complete this survey online? Use this QR Code →



Are you a resident of Matanuska-Susitna Borough (Mat-Su)?

Yes

No

In order to move forward, you must be a resident of Matanuska-Susitna Borough (Mat-Su)



The following questions are about the food needs and desires of people in the Mat-Su Borough.

How concerned are you that people in the Mat-Su Borough do not have enough food?

Very concerned Somewhat concerned Not very concerned Not at all concerned

In the past 12 months, how often have you or someone in your household used each of the following sources to consume food?

	Almost every month	Some months but not every month	1 or 2 months	Never
Convenience Store (carryout, corner store, gas station, general store)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Dine-in/Full-Service Restaurant	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Farm Stand/ Farmer's Market	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Fast Food Restaurant	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Food Pantry	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Grocery Store (i.e. Three Bears)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Subsistence (i.e. hunting, fishing, etc.)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>



Which are the top three ways you prefer to get your food? (Choose up to three)

Convenience Store	<input type="radio"/>
Dine-in/Full-Service Restaurant	<input type="radio"/>
Family or Friends	<input type="radio"/>
Farm Stand/ Farmer's Market	<input type="radio"/>
Fast Food Restaurant	<input type="radio"/>
Food Pantry	<input type="radio"/>
Grocery Store	<input type="radio"/>
Grow Your Own	<input type="radio"/>
Mail Order or Delivery Service	<input type="radio"/>
Subsistence	<input type="radio"/>

Does anyone in your household require specific food(s) due to a health or dietary issue?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure



Is it challenging to make sure anyone in your household has the food(s) they require for a medical condition?

- Yes, most of the time
- Yes, some of the time
- No, never
- No one in my household has a medical condition that requires special foods

In the last 12 months how often did you or other adults in your household ever cut the size of your meals or skip meals due to financial constraints?

- Almost every month
- Some months but not every month
- 1 or 2 months
- Never

In the last 12 months, were you worried you would not have enough to eat because of a lack of money or other resources?

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to answer



**Which of the following months are you able to have enough of the food you need and want?
(Select all that apply.)**

January	February	March	April
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
May	June	July	August
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
September	October	November	December
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Never			
<input type="radio"/>			



If you are not able to have enough food in certain months, what are the reasons. (Select all that apply.)

- Cost
- I have enough food in all months
- Primary food of consumption out of season
- Shortage of fresh produce
- Transportation/ Difficulty accessing local stores
- Other, please explain: _____

How would you describe the food available to you? (Check all that apply)

- Affordable
- Convenient
- Culturally Appropriate
- Fresh
- Healthy/Nutritious
- Mostly Processed and Packaged
- Spoiled/ Not Fresh
- Tasty
- Unaffordable



What would be a helpful resource/support to be able to gain access to more of the food(s) that you need and want? (Select all that apply.)

- A community of people to share growing, harvesting, and preserving responsibilities with
- Education and knowledge on how to safely grow and preserve my own food
- Equipment and tools for subsistence
- Food delivery services to the place I live
- Increased access to local pantries
- Increased access to SNAP/WIC/ATAP/FDPIR benefits (i.e. Food Stamps)
- Land and space to grow my own food
- Public transportation to a market or store
- Supplies and tools to grow my own food
- Supplies to safely store and preserve foods

Which of these are challenges to getting the food you want to eat? (Select all that apply.)

- Distance from food stores
- Don't know where or how to find it
- Lack of culturally relevant food
- Lack of knowledge of how to prepare and cook
- Lack of proper cooking equipment
- Lack of storage for the food
- Lack of time to shop or cook
- Lack of transportation
- Not available where I shop
- Poor selection or quality of food
- Price
- Something else, please explain: _____



What are the top three challenges to accessing healthy, nutritious, fresh, and/or culturally appropriate foods you want to eat?

- Cost
- Food not available locally
- Transportation
- Difficulty storing or preserving the food
- Lack of knowledge about where to locate these items locally
- Other, please explain: _____

In the last 12 months, have you had to change your food purchasing habits due to rising food prices (i.e. inflation)?

- Yes, significantly
- Yes, somewhat
- No, not at all

If you answered yes to the above question, what changes have you made in response to rising food costs? (Select all that apply)

- Buying less food overall
- Choosing cheaper, less healthy/nutritious options
- Changing food brands for cheaper option
- Buying in bulk to save money
- Cutting out certain foods entirely
- Shopping at different stores
- Relying more on food assistance programs (i.e. SNAP, food pantry, etc.)
- Eating fewer meals or smaller portions
- Something else, please explain: _____



What are your suggestions to improve how people get the food they want and need?

This section will ask questions about resources and opportunities to access food.

In the last 12 months, have you or anyone in your household used a food pantry or other food assistance service?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

If you answered yes to the above question, how often did you or someone in your household visit the food pantry or use another food assistance service

- Weekly
- Monthly
- A few times a year
- Only during emergencies

Does the food you receive from the food pantry and/or other food assistance service meet your household's food needs?

- Yes, it meets our need completely
- It meets most of our needs
- It meets some of our needs
- No, it does not meet our needs at all



What could be improved about the food pantries in your community? (Select all that apply.)

- Atmosphere/community feeling
- Hours of operation
- Instructions or recipes on how to prepare or store the food
- Location
- Portion/size of food available
- Stigma associated with using a pantry
- Type of food available
- I don't know
- Nothing
- Other, please explain: _____

In the last 12 months, have you or someone in your household received food assistance and/or SNAP, WIC, FRPIR, ATAP benefits? (Select all that apply)

- Yes, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP also known as Food Stamps)
- Yes, Women, Infants, and Children Program (WIC)
- Yes, Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FRPIR)
- Yes, Alaska Temporary Assistance Program (ATAP)
- No

Have you or someone in your household encountered barriers to using food assistance programs such as SNAP, WIC, FRPIR, ATAP, etc.?

- Yes
- No



If you have experienced difficulties using food assistance benefits (SNAP, WIC, FRPIR, ATAP, etc.) what were the main challenges? (Select all that apply.)

- Benefits are not sufficient to support my household
- Difficulty applying or reapplying for benefits
- Language barriers
- Limited stores accepting benefits
- Long waiting times for benefits approval
- Stigma or feeling judged for using benefits
- Other, please explain: _____

Has the food assistance benefits program (i.e., SNAP, WIC, FRPIR, ATAP, etc.) benefited your diet or the diet of someone in your household?

- Yes
- No
- Never used these benefits

How many children (17 years old and younger) in your household receive free or reduced breakfast and lunch?

- I don't have children at home
- Please enter number of children here _____
- None

Do children (17 years old and younger) in your household receive food from any other food service programs (i.e. Kids Kupboard, etc.).

- Yes, all of them (all the children in my home)
- Yes, some of them (some of the children in my home)
- No, none of them (none of the children in my home)
- Not applicable



In the last 12 months, have you attended and/or participated in any community-based programming to learn about growing, preparing, or preserving food?

Yes, if so, please list the organization(s) _____

No and I'm not interested

No, but I'm interested

In the last 12 months, have you attended and/or participated in any community-based programming to learn about purchasing food?

Yes, if so, please list the organization(s) _____

No and I'm not interested

No, but I'm interested

What would motivate you to participate in programs that teach about growing, preserving, preparing, and purchasing food? (Select all that apply.)

Ability to get to the location/transportation to the program

Access to supplies

Better access to the information and programming

Cost

Hands-on learning experiences

More convenient locations and times

I'm not interested

Other, please explain: _____



What else should we know about in terms of having food in the Mat-Su Borough?

This section will ask questions about growing food.

Do you grow/harvest any food? (Select all that apply)

- Yes, most of my food is grown/harvested by me or someone in my household
- Yes, some of my food is grown/harvested by me or someone in my household
- Yes, most of my food is hunted/fished by me or someone in my household
- Yes, some of my food is hunted/fished by me or someone in my household
- No, I do not grow/harvest/hunt/fish any of my food
- No, but I am interested in growing/harvesting/hunting/fishing my food

Do you and your household have adequate access to traditional subsistence foods?

- Yes
- No

Is there something that would improve your access to traditional subsistence foods?



What resources about growing food would be helpful to you? (Select all that apply)

- Education and knowledge about how to grow food for my own use
- Education and knowledge about how to grow food to sell
- Education and knowledge about how to preserve food
- Greenhouses
- Land for growing
- Supplies and tools to grow my own food
- I don't need anything
- Other, please explain: _____

Demographic Questions

What race/ethnicity do you identify as? (Select all that apply)

- African American/ Black
- Alaska Native
- American Indian/Native American
- Asian American/Asian (East, South, Southeast)
- Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
- Latino(a)/Hispanic
- Middle Eastern or North African
- White/European American
- Preferred race/ethnicity (in addition to or not listed above): _____
- Prefer not to answer



What is your age?

- 18—24 years old
- 25—34 years old
- 35—44 years old
- 45—54 years old
- 55—64 years old
- 65 and older

What is your employment status?

- Employed full time (37.5+ hours a week)
- Employed part-time
- Currently unemployed
- Not employed and not seeking employment
- Unable to work due to disability
- Full-time Student
- Retired
- Prefer not to answer

Are you a seasonal worker?

- Yes
- No



What is the highest level of education you have completed?

- Less than high school
- High school diploma or equivalent
- Tech/Trade School certification
- Some college (no degree)
- Associate degree (2-year degree)
- Bachelor's degree (4-year degree)
- Graduate degree

What is your current annual household income?

- Less than \$35,000
- \$35,000-\$49,999
- \$50,000-\$74,999
- \$75,000-\$99,999
- \$100,000-\$149,000
- \$150,000-\$199,999
- \$200,000 or above

What is your current household size, based on age? Please provide the number of people in each age range.

17 years old and under: _____

18–24 years old: _____

25–34 years old: _____

35–44 years old: _____

45–54 years old: _____

55–64 years old: _____

65 and older: _____



Do you identify as a person with a disability or other chronic condition?

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to answer

Are you a veteran or active member of the United States Armed Forces?

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to answer



Where in the Mat-Su Borough do you call home?

Big Lake	Buffalo Soapstone Creek	Butte	Chase
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Chickaloon	Eureka	Farm Loop	Fishhook
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Gateway	Glacier View	Houston	Knik River
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Knik-Fairview	Lake Louise	Lazy Mountain	Meadow Lakes
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Palmer	Petersville	Point MacKenzie	Skwentna
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Susitna	Susitna North	Sutton/Alpine	Talkeetna
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Tanana	Trapper	Wasilla	Willow
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Other: _____

Do you reside in Mat-Su year-round?

Yes
 No



MAT-SU HEALTH
FOUNDATION



If you answered no to the above question, which months do you reside in Mat-Su?

January

February

March

April

May

June

July

August

September

October

November

December

What gender do you identify as?



Thank you for completing our survey. As a token of our appreciation, you can be included in a random drawing for one of five \$50 gift cards.

Winners will be notified after the survey closes on Friday, November 1, 2024.



Appendix C

Focus Group and Survey Participants

Survey and Focus Group Participants

Characteristics of Survey Respondents		
Age	#	%
18-24	10	2%
25-34	52	13%
35-44	98	24%
45-54	73	18%
55-64	88	21%
65 and older	91	22%
Gender	#	%
Female	308	72%
Male	52	12%
Gender Queer, Non-Binary	2	0.50%
Prefer not to say/No response	61	14%
Race/Ethnicity	#	%
African American/Black	1	0.2%
Alaska Native	31	8%
American Indian/Native American	4	1%
Asian American/Asian	7	2%
Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	2	0%
Latino(a)/Hispanic	5	1%
Two or more races	45	11%
White/European American	274	66%
Write-in/Not listed	12	3%
Prefer not to answer	32	8%
Disability or Chronic Condition	#	%
Yes	150	36%
No	242	59%
Prefer not to answer	20	5%
Veteran or Member of the Armed Forces	#	%
Yes	48	12%
No	358	87%
Prefer not to answer	4	1%
Education	#	%
Less than high school	6	1%
High School diploma or equivalent	67	16%
Tech/Trade school certification	22	5%
Some college (no degree)	107	26%
Associate degree (2 -year degree)	53	13%
Bachelor's degree (4 -year degree)	86	21%
Graduate degree	72	17%
Employment	#	%
Employed full-time	190	46%
Employed part-time	55	13%
Currently unemployed	19	5%
Not employed and not seeking employment	9	2%
Unable to work due to disability	35	8%
Full-time student	4	1%
Retired	85	21%
Prefer not to answer	17	4%
Household Income	#	%
Less than \$35,000	113	29%
\$35,000 - \$49,999	64	16%
\$50,000 - \$74,999	76	19%
\$75,000 - \$99,999	50	13%
\$100,000 - \$149,000	57	15%
\$150,000 - \$199,999	18	5%
\$200,000 or above	15	4%
Households by Age	#	%
Households with children (17 and under)	180	44%
Households with older adults (55+)	205	50%
Households with older adults (65+)	122	30%

Focus Group locations and participants

Focus Group location	Number of participants
Palmer - School Nurses	6
Food Convening participants	13
Food Coalition	8
CCS Early Learning - Parents	6
Chickaloon Elders Lunch	8
Knik Charter School -- Staff and Parents	7
Willow Food Pantry – Staff and clients	3
Talkeetna – Talkeetna residents	7
Frontline Mission – Staff and clients	3



Appendix D

Focus Group and Survey Participants

Survey Data

How concerned are you that people in the Mat-Su community do not have enough food?	n	Total	%
Very Concerned	230	495	46%
Somewhat Concerned	209	495	42%
Not Very Concerned	52	495	11%
Not at all Concerned	8	495	2%
Missing	57		
Total	552		

In the past 12 months, how often have you or someone in your household used the following sources to consume food?											
	Almost Every Month (n)	%	Some Months, but not every month (n)	%	One or Two Months (n)	%	Never (n)	%	Total	Missing	
Convenience Store	208	42%	108	22%	75	15%	108	22%	499	53	
Dine-in/Full-Service Restaurant	170	34%	125	25%	130	26%	74	15%	499	53	
Farm Stand/Farmer's Market	50	10%	122	24%	154	31%	173	35%	499	53	
Fast Food Restaurant	148	30%	113	23%	131	27%	102	21%	494	58	
Food Pantry	77	16%	42	9%	44	9%	330	67%	493	59	
Grocery Store	449	89%	31	6%	18	4%	5	1%	503	49	
Subsistence (i.e., hunting, fishing, etc.)	78	16%	116	23%	123	25%	182	36%	499	53	

Which are the top three ways you prefer to get your food? (Choose up to three)	n	Total	%
Convenience store (carryout, corner store, gas station, general store)	44	505	9%
Dine-In/Full-Service Restaurant	101	505	20%
Family or Friends	55	505	11%
Farm Stand/Farmer's Market	184	505	36%
Fast Food Restaurant	53	505	10%
Food Pantry	66	505	13%
Grocery Store	455	505	90%
Grow your own	224	505	44%
Mail order or Delivery service	43	505	9%
Subsistence (i.e., hunting, fishing, etc.)	200	505	40%

Does anyone in your household require specific food(s) due to a health or dietary issue?	n	Total	%
Yes	210	505	42%
No	282	505	56%
Not Sure	13	505	3%
Missing	47		

Is it challenging to make sure anyone in your household has the food(s) they require for a medical condition?	n	Total	%
Yes, most of the time	69	502	14%
Yes, some of the time	133	502	26%
No, never	108	502	22%
No one in my household has a medical condition that requires special food(s)	192	502	38%
Missing	50		

In the last 12 months, how often did you or other adults in your household ever cut the size of your meals or skip meals due to financial constraints?

	n	Total	%
Almost every month	92	504	18%
Some months, but not every month	102	504	20%
1 or 2 months	56	504	11%
Never	254	504	50%
Missing	48		

In the last 12 months, were you worried you would not have enough to eat because of a lack of money or other resources?

	n	Total	%
Yes	175	502	35%
No	289	502	58%
Prefer not to answer	38	502	8%
Missing	50		

**Which of the following months are you able to have enough of the food you need and want?
(Select all that apply)**

	n	Total	%
January	285	489	58%
February	279	489	57%
March	286	489	58%
April	299	489	61%
May	328	489	67%
June	359	489	73%
July	372	489	76%
August	362	489	74%
September	340	489	70%
October	337	489	69%
November	300	489	61%
December	282	489	58%
Never	75	489	15%
Missing	63		

If you are not able to have enough food in certain months, what are the reasons? (Select all that apply)	n	Total	%
Cost	167	375	45%
I have enough food in all months	150	375	40%
Primary food of consumption out of season	41	375	11%
Shortage of fresh produce	92	375	25%
Transportation/difficulty accessing local stores	41	375	11%
Other, please explain:	44	375	12%
Missing	177		

Most common other reasons: other expenses, cost, difficulty accessing social services, shortages in food available

How would you describe the food available to you? (Select all that apply)	n	Total	%
Affordable	92	472	19%
Convenient	173	472	37%
Culturally appropriate	62	472	13%
Fresh	156	472	33%
Healthy/nutritious	185	472	39%
Mostly processed and packaged	192	472	41%
Spoiled/Not fresh	54	472	11%
Tasty	111	472	24%
Unaffordable	249	472	53%
Missing	80		

What would be a helpful resource/support to be able to gain access to more of the food(s) that you need and want? (Select all that apply)	n	Total	%
A community of people to share growing, harvesting, and preserving responsibilities with	244	449	54%
Education and knowledge on how to safely grow and preserve my own food	196	449	44%
Equipment and tools for subsistence	132	449	29%
Food delivery services to the place I live	74	449	16%
Increased access to local pantries	90	449	20%
Increased access to SNAP/WIC/ATAP/FDPIR benefits (i.e., Food stamps)	129	449	29%
Land and space to grow my own food	129	449	29%
Public transportation to a market or store	74	449	16%
Supplies and tools to grow my own food	195	449	43%
Supplies to safely store and preserve foods	217	449	48%
Something else, please explain:	53	414	13%

Most common other resource: Reducing the cost/financial burden, increase in food storage and processing options, increased access to subsistence forms of food, money, less government regulations, transportation, higher quality foods .

Which of these are challenges to getting the food you want to eat? (Select all that apply)	n	Total	%
Distance from food stores	122	451	27%
Don't know where or how to find it	20	451	4%
Lack of culturally relevant food	30	451	7%
Lack of knowledge of how to prepare and cook	34	451	8%
Lack of proper cooking equipment	29	451	6%
Lack of storage for food	97	451	22%
Lack of time to shop or cook	108	451	24%
Lack of transportation	36	451	8%
Not available where I shop	53	451	12%
Poor selection or quality of food	156	451	35%
Price	329	451	73%
Something else, please explain:	46	451	10%
Missing	101		

Most common other challenges: cost, dietary restrictions, lack of quality fresh foods, health issues, weather, transportation, barriers to accessing social services .

What are the top three challenges to accessing healthy, nutritious, fresh, and/or culturally appropriate foods that you want to eat? (select all that apply)

	n	Total	%
Cost	396	453	87%
Food not available locally	200	453	44%
Transportation	69	453	15%
Difficulty storing or preserving the food	148	453	33%
Lack of knowledge about where to locate these items locally	69	453	15%
Other, please explain:	39	453	9%
Missing	99		

Most common other challenges: Cost, time constraints to prepare and cook, transportation, lack of fresh foods, lack of processing and storage options, challenges to practicing subsistence

In the last 12 months, have you had to change your food purchasing habits due to rising food prices (i.e., inflation)?

	n	Total	%
Yes, significantly	221	473	47%
Yes, somewhat	212	473	45%
No, not at all	40	473	8%
Missing:	79		

If you answered 'Yes' to the prior question, what changes have you made in response to rising food costs? (Select all that apply)

	n	Total	%
Relying more on food assistance programs (i.e., SNAP, food pantry, etc.)	69	412	17%
Eating fewer meals or smaller portions	137	412	33%
Shopping at different stores	167	412	41%
Buying in bulk to save money	170	412	41%
Buying less food overall	244	412	59%
Choosing cheaper, less healthy/nutritious options	244	412	59%
Cutting out certain foods entirely	250	412	61%
Changing food brands for cheaper options	262	412	64%
Something else, please explain:	27	412	7%
Missing	140		

Most common other changes: cooking at home, restricting eating, substituting for frozen or other foods, relying on social services or friends

In the last 12 months, have you or anyone in your household used a food pantry or other food assistance service?

	n	Total	%
Yes	170	456	37%
No	275	456	60%
Not sure	11	456	2%
Missing	96		

How often did you or someone in your household visit the food pantry or use another food assistance service?

	n	Total	%
Weekly	28	155	18%
Monthly	74	155	48%
A few times a year	36	155	23%
Only during emergencies	17	155	11%
Missing	297		

Does the food you receive from the food pantry and/or other food assistance service meet your household's food needs?			
	n	Total	%
Yes, it meets our need completely	23	247	9%
It meets most of our needs	39	247	16%
It meets some of our needs	130	247	53%
No, it does not meet our needs at all	55	247	22%
Missing	305		

What could be improved about the food pantries in your community? (Select all that apply)			
	n	Total	%
Atmosphere/Community feeling	36	353	10%
Hours of operation	119	353	34%
Instruction or recipes on how to prepare or store the food	51	353	14%
Location	60	353	17%
Portion/size of food available	79	353	22%
Stigma associated with using a pantry	96	353	27%
Type of food available	130	353	37%
I don't know	98	353	28%
Nothing	23	353	7%
Something else, please explain:	35	353	10%
Missing	199		

Most common other improvement: higher quality and diversity of food options.

In the last 12 months, have you or someone in your household received food assistance, and/or SNAP ATAP Benefits? (Select all that apply)	n	Total	%
Yes, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)	77	410	19%
Yes, Women, Infants and Children Program (WIC)	29	410	7%
Yes, Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FRPIR)	2	410	0.5%
Yes, Alaska Temporary Assistance Program (ATAP)	5	410	1%
No	318	410	78%
Missing	142		

Have you or someone in your household encountered barriers to using food assistance programs such as SNAP, WIC, FRPIR, ATAP, etc.?	n	Total	%
Yes	107	378	28%
No	271	378	72%
Missing	174		

If you have experienced difficulties using food assistance benefits, what were the main challenges? (Select all that apply)	n	Total	%
Benefits are not sufficient to support my household	55	187	29%
Difficulty applying or reapplying for benefits	68	187	36%
Language barriers	1	187	1%
Limited stores accepting benefits	10	187	5%
Long waiting times for benefits approval	69	187	37%
Stigma or feeling judged for using benefits	50	187	27%
Other, please explain:	73	187	39%
Missing	365		

Most common other challenges: ineligibility, difficulty reapplying, limited food options.

Has the food assistance benefits program benefited your diet or the diet of someone in your household?			
	n	Total	%
Yes	116	386	30%
No	68	386	18%
Never used these benefits	202	386	52%
Missing	166		

How many children (17 years old and younger) in your household receive free or reduced breakfast and lunch?			
	n	Total	%
I don't have children at home	126	408	31%
Please enter number of children here	91	408	22%
None	191	408	47%
Missing	144		

Do children in your household receive food from any other food service programs (i.e., Kids Kupboard, etc.)			
	n	Total	%
Yes, all of them	26	400	7%
Yes, some of them	15	400	4%
No, none of them	114	400	29%
Not applicable	245	400	61%
Missing	152		

In the last 12 months, have you attended and/or participated in any community-based programming to learn about growing, preparing, or preserving food?

	n	Total	%
Yes (if so, please list the organization(s))	39	411	9%
No, and I'm not interested	103	411	25%
No, but I'm interested	269	411	65%
Missing	141		

Specific Programming	Number of responses
4-H	1
Alaskans Afield Program	1
APU	2
Big Lake Library	1
Calypso Farm	2
Church led program	1
Common Ground Framstead	1
Gowing and Canning	1
Kids Kupboard	1
Knick Tribe	2
Master Gardener Association	1
Migrant Education and Summer Program	2
NVE	1
Pickling	1
Sutton Library	1
Trees growing, beekeeping and berry picking	1
UAF Cooperative Extension	11
Upper Susitna food pantry	2
USDA/UAF	1
VNPCC	1
WASI	1
YouTube/online	2

In the last 12 months, have you attended and/or participated in any community-based programming to learn about purchasing food?

n Total %

Yes (if so, please list the organization(s))	7	413	2%
No, and I'm not interested	208	413	50%
No, but I'm interested	198	413	48%
Missing	139		

What would motivate you to participate in programs that teach about growing, preserving, preparing and purchasing food? (select all that apply)

n Total %

Ability to get to the location/transportation to the program	70	403	17%
Access to supplies	153	403	38%
Better access to the information and programming	151	403	37%
Cost	194	403	48%
Hands-on learning experiences	207	403	51%
More convenient locations and times	158	403	39%
I'm not interested	55	403	14%
Other, please explain	42	403	10%
Missing	149		

Most common other molvalon : accessible/online content, childcare, transportalon, financial support, support with obtaining supplies

Do you grow/harvest any food? (Select all that apply)

n Total %

Yes, most of my food is grown/harvested by me or someone in my household	12	410	3%
Yes, some of my food is grown/harvested by me or someone in my household	200	410	49%
Yes, most of my food is hunted/fished by me or someone in my household	24	410	6%
Yes, some of my food is hunted/fished by me or someone in my household	155	410	38%
No, I do not grow/harvest/fish any of my food	73	410	18%
No, but I am interested in growing/harvesting/hunting/fishing my food	80	410	20%
Missing	142		

Do you and your household have adequate access to traditional subsistence foods?	n	Total	%
Yes	179	382	47%
No	203	382	53%
Missing	170		

What resources about growing food would be helpful to you? (select all that apply)	n	Total	%
Education and knowledge about how to grow food for my own use	194	411	47%
Education and knowledge about how to grow food to sell	46	411	11%
Education and knowledge about how to preserve food	159	411	39%
Greenhouses	261	411	64%
Land for growing	134	411	33%
Supplies and tools to grow my own food	198	411	48%
I don't need anything	57	411	14%
Other, please explain	20	411	5%
Missing	141		

Most common other resources: connecting producers and consumers, gardening assistance, education on gardening based on climate, support with obtaining supplies.

What race/ethnicity do you identify as?	n	Total	%
African American/Black	1	413	0%
Alaska Native	31	413	8%
American Indian/Native American	4	413	1%
Asian American/Asian	7	413	2%
Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	2	413	0%
Latino(a)/Hispanic	5	413	1%
White/European American	274	413	66%
Write-in/Not Listed Above	12	413	3%
Biracial	37	413	9%
Multiracial	8	413	2%
Prefer Not to Answer	32	413	8%
Missing	139		

What is your age?	n	Total	%
18-24	10	412	2%
24-34	52	412	13%
35-44	98	412	24%
45-54	73	412	18%
55-64	88	412	21%
Missing	140		

What is your employment status?	n	Total	%
Employed full-time	190	414	46%
Employed part-time	55	414	13%
Currently unemployed	19	414	5%
Not employed and not seeking employment	9	414	2%
Unable to work due to disability	35	414	8%
Full-time student	4	414	1%
Retired	85	414	21%
Prefer not to answer	17	414	4%
Missing	138		

Are you a seasonal worker?	n	Total	%
Yes	19	406	5%
No	387	406	95%
Missing	146		

What is the highest level of education you have completed?	n	Total	%
Less than high school	6	413	1%
High School diploma or equivalent	67	413	16%
Tech/Trade school certification	22	413	5%
Some college (no degree)	107	413	26%
Associate degree (2 -year degree)	53	413	13%
Bachelor's degree (4 -year degree)	86	413	21%
Graduate degree	72	413	17%
Missing	139		

What is your current annual household income?	n	Total	%
Less than \$35,000	113	393	29%
\$35,000 - \$49,999	64	393	16%
\$50,000 - \$74,999	76	393	19%
\$75,000 - \$99,999	50	393	13%
\$100,000 - \$149,000	57	393	15%
\$150,000 - \$199,999	18	393	5%
\$200,000 or above	15	393	4%
Missing	159		

What is your current household size, based on age? Please provide the number of people in each age range. (Select all that apply)

	n	Total	%
17 years old and under	180	410	44%
18-24 years old	60	410	15%
25-34 years old	84	410	20%
35-44 years old	132	410	32%
45-54 years old	96	410	23%
55-64 years old	114	410	28%
65 and older	122	410	30%
Missing	142		

Do you identify as a person with a disability or other chronic condition?

	n	Total	%
Yes	150	412	36%
No	242	412	59%
Prefer not to answer	20	412	5%
Missing	140		

Are you a veteran or active member of the United States Armed Forces?

	n	Total	%
Yes	48	410	12%
No	358	410	87%
Prefer not to answer	4	410	1%
Missing	142		

Where in the Mat-Su Borough do you call home?	n	Total	%
Big Lake	26	417	6.2%
Buffalo Mine	1	417	0.2%
Buie	7	417	1.7%
Chase	0	417	0.0%
Chickaloon	3	417	0.7%
Eureka	0	417	0.0%
Farm Loop	4	417	1.0%
Fishhook	23	417	5.5%
Gateway	12	417	2.9%
Glacier View	2	417	0.5%
Houston	13	417	3.1%
Knik River	1	417	0.2%
Knik-Fairview	35	417	8.4%
Lake Louise	0	417	0.0%
Lazy Mountain	4	417	1.0%
Meadow Lakes	18	417	4.3%
Palmer	64	417	15.3%
Petersville	1	417	0.2%
Point MacKenzie	1	417	0.2%
Skwentna	0	417	0.0%
Susitna	2	417	0.5%
Susitna North	2	417	0.5%
Suion -Alpine	8	417	1.9%
Talkeetna	14	417	3.4%
Tanana	0	417	0.0%
Trapper Creek	4	417	1.0%
Wasilla	125	417	30.0%
Willow	37	417	8.9%
Other:	10	417	2.4%
Missing	135		

Do you reside in Mat-Su year-round?	n	Total	%
Yes	409	414	99%
No	5	414	1%
Missing:	138		