



## Background

This *Food Insecurity Report: Understanding the Disparities and Experiences of Hunger across the City of Alexandria* was commissioned by the City of Alexandria's Department of Community and Human Services (DCHS), with funding from the City's American Rescue Plan Act allocation. See What I Mean Consulting (SWIM) was selected through an open request for proposals process in early 2023. In collaboration with the DCHS Food Security Coordinator, they analyzed city data, researched client experience, and crafted this report. The purpose of this report is to assess the realities and resources of food insecurity that exist in Alexandria by looking at the overall economic and food landscape, as well as the experiences of people accessing services.

## Methodology

- Sources cited included data from the City of Alexandria and State of Virginia, Alexandria City Public Schools, the 2020 Census, the 2022 American Community Survey, Feeding America, Alive!, Capital Area Food Bank, United Way of National Capital Area, US Department of Agriculture, the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, and the City of Alexandria Food Insecurity Work Group.
- A survey of Alexandria neighbors **experiencing or at risk of experiencing food insecurity** was launched from October 11, 2023–December 8, 2023. 245 surveys were completed. Surveys were available in English and Spanish. Neighbors received a \$5 grocery card for completing a survey.
- Five focus groups in Alexandria were held from December 6–8, 2023, with a total of 70 participants. Focus group locations were chosen to target older adults, the unhoused, food pantry guests, and Latino/a/e and African immigrants. The Latino/a/e focus group was conducted in Spanish and the African focus group was conducted in English and Amharic. Both focus groups used a local interpreter. Neighbors received a \$50 grocery card for focus group participation.
- Eighteen Alexandria-based community groups and nonprofits that serve neighbors experiencing food insecurity were invited to complete SWIM's network assessment to explore their current services, capacity, goals, and needs for supporting neighbors.

### Who was engaged?



**245** Neighbor Surveys



**18** Network Assessments



**70** Focus Group Participants



**3** City of Alexandria Departments

## Key Findings

- 8% of households in Alexandria are food insecure and 9% of Alexandria residents are living with resources below the federal poverty line.
- 44% individuals in Alexandria who are food insecure are not eligible for government assistance due to income. This, paired with age-related poverty rates, low unemployment, and low unhoused population, suggests that food insecurity in Alexandria is mostly likely attributed to the high cost of living.



- 82% of residents surveyed reported experiencing low or very low food security. 79% of neighbors surveyed reported it was “often true” or “sometimes true” that they “couldn’t afford to eat balanced meals.”
- A wide variety of supports exist across the City of Alexandria to support people facing food insecurity. DCHS offers multifaceted outreach to support community members accessing government benefits like Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), while community based supports offer access to free food and other support services.
- Participants have high satisfaction rates with current services, but some have access challenges. One key challenge is having services available on weekends and evenings.
- Knowledge of services, having access to charitable food assistance, and trust in the programs and services were the key barriers to access identified.
- Four populations were identified in the research process as “under-resourced:” the unhoused, older adults, immigrants and non-English speakers, and the Latino/a/e/ community. These populations are disproportionately impacted by food insecurity, and present specific challenges in providing access, such as knowledge of services, transportation, language barriers, lack of trust, and specific cultural and/or health needs.
- The City of Alexandria is well situated to address these challenges and barriers. There are opportunities to address these barriers through direct outreach, new distribution models that address access issues, and continued engagement with communities to develop trust.



### Recommended Next Steps

| Supports for Food Insecurity                           | Under-resourced Populations  | Barriers to Access  |
|--|--|---|
| More nights and weekend hours for food distribution.   | Keep neighbors at the decision-making table.                             | Scale up direct neighbor outreach.  |
| Different models for different neighbors.              | Engage with trusted partners and create feedback loops.                  | Provide a delivery option for certain populations.                                |
| Education for all on food dating and its implications. | Food sourcing to meet cultural, religious, and health needs/preferences. | Look for wrap-around service opportunities that align with public transportation. |



### Conclusion

What was uncovered in this study was that certain population groups have a harder time accessing the traditional charitable food system model. At the same time, thousands of community members facing food insecurity find the traditional models to fit their needs. The City of Alexandria can use its resources and networks to continue to provide the services currently appreciated by many neighbors while adapting or adding programs that address the particular needs of those neighbors that are being missed.