



THE STATE OF FOOD INSECURITY IN HAWAI'I 2023

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
RELEASED MAY 2024



Food insecurity is the **lack of access to enough food for an active, healthy life.**¹ Food insecurity manifests in different ways – ranging from concerns about running out of food before there is money to buy more, to the inability to afford a balanced diet, reducing food intake, missing meals altogether, and, in extreme cases, not eating for whole days because of a lack of food and money.

UNDERSTANDING THE ISSUE

Food insecurity is associated with numerous adverse social and health outcomes and is increasingly considered a critical public health issue and a significant social determinant of health. Key drivers of food insecurity include cost of living, unemployment, insufficient income, unexpected income shocks and other factors that can prevent adequate access to food.

Food insecurity does not exist in a vacuum. People who face challenges accessing enough food also face challenges affording adequate housing, healthcare, transportation and other basic needs.

Food insecurity in Hawai'i is a complex issue, and effective solutions will require a deep understanding of the challenges uniquely faced by local individuals, families and communities.



ABOUT THE STUDY

The impacts of food insecurity are widespread and pervasive. In *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World*, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations estimates that 29% of the global population – 2.4 billion people – were moderately or severely food insecure in 2022.ⁱ At the same time, Feeding America’s *Map the Meal Gap* reports that food insecurity currently exists in 100% of counties and congressional districts in the United States.ⁱⁱⁱ

While macrolevel data can help tell a broad story about food insecurity, experiences differ by population and place. This holds especially true in Hawaii. As one of the most expensive and diverse places in the world, it is not unusual for local data to vary from what is reported on the national level.

Therefore, to deepen understanding of food insecurity at the local level and to continue to strengthen opportunities for the communities it serves, Hawaii Foodbank commissioned *The State of Food Insecurity in Hawaii*, a comprehensive report that examines food

insecurity in Hawaii. To accurately estimate local levels of food insecurity, a statewide survey of 910 Hawaii residents was conducted using the United States Household Food Security Survey Module (US HFSSM), the most validated food security measurement tool applied in population studies.

The State of Food Insecurity in Hawaii examines a variety of indicators at state and county levels, as well as key demographics such as age, sex, and race/ethnicity. Additionally, information was gathered to analyze respondents’ characteristics, their use and knowledge of food bank services, other methods of obtaining food, their health, and ways in which they may have been affected by the Maui wildfires.

The State of Food Insecurity in Hawaii was administered by SMS Research and analyzed by Pirkle Epidemiology and Evaluation Consulting LLC. For additional information or methodological details, please see the full report found at HawaiiFoodbank.org/food-insecurity.

KEY FINDINGS

► FOOD INSECURITY IN HAWAII

At 30%, nearly one-third of households in Hawai'i experienced food insecurity in 2023. 11% were categorized as low food security and 19% as very low food security.



1 in 3

Nearly 1 in 3 Hawai'i households were food insecure in 2023.

Low food security is characterized primarily by reductions in dietary quality and variety, whereas very low food insecure households are food insecure to the extent that eating patterns are disrupted (e.g., skipping meals) and food intake reduced because the household cannot afford enough food.

In 2023, one in ten Hawai'i households were going without food for a whole day, some or most months out of the year. Another 14% of households were marginally food secure.

Regardless of food security status, 37% of all households expressed experiencing anxiety about running out of food before they could get money to buy more.



In 29% of households with children, one or more children were facing food insecurity.

► HOUSEHOLDS WITH CHILDREN

Twenty-nine percent of households with children had one or multiple children facing food insecurity in 2023.

Among households with children, 9% had children skipping meals because there was not enough food. In 7.5% of households, this happened multiple or most months. At the most extreme, 6% of households had a child or children go a whole day without food because of a lack of money.

In households with children, food insecurity among adults was especially high at 38%, and those with young children found themselves most susceptible – indicative that parents and caregivers will sacrifice their own food security before letting their children go without food.



37% of all households felt anxious about running out of food.



1 in 10 Hawai'i households were going without food for a whole day some or most months out of the year.

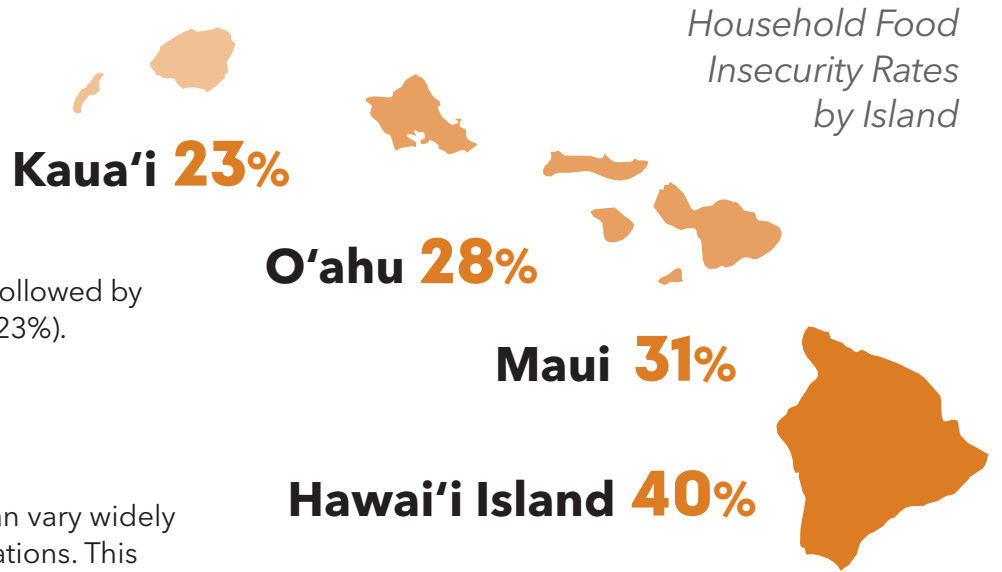


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► GEOGRAPHY

Food insecurity was consistently high across the islands, as the lowest rate was still nearly one-quarter of all households.

Hawai'i Island (40%) ranked highest, followed by Maui (31%), O'ahu (28%) and Kaua'i (23%).

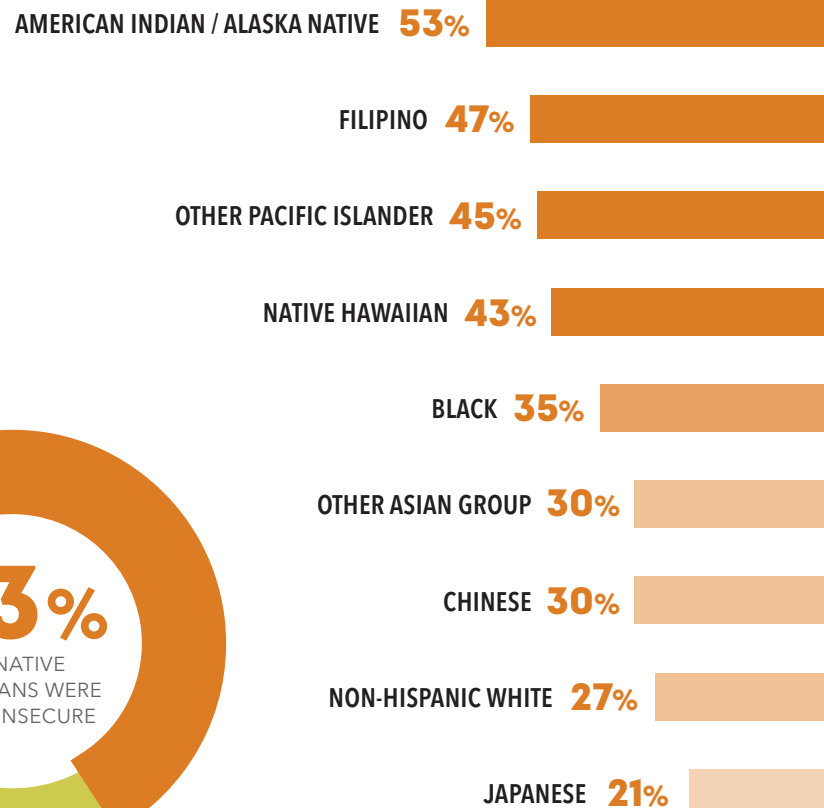


► RACE AND ETHNICITY

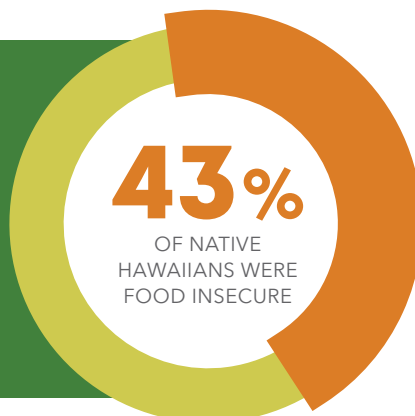
The prevalence of food insecurity can vary widely for different racial and ethnic populations. This holds especially true in Hawai'i, where a majority of the population has historically been grouped within the category of Asian American, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander (AANHPI). Data and assumptions that treat AANHPI populations as one large group tend to overlook the individuality of each community and ignore the vastly different outcomes that may exist.

Over 40% of Native Hawaiians, other Pacific Islanders, Filipinos and American Indian/Alaska Natives lived in food-insecure households. Meanwhile, other communities within the larger AANHPI grouping experienced food insecurity at significantly lower rates. These discrepancies stress the importance of considering each community independently.

Food Insecurity Rates by Race and Ethnicity



Some groups within the AANHPI category were **more than twice as likely to experience food insecurity** than others.





► **DEMOGRAPHICS AT HIGH RISK OF FOOD INSECURITY**

At 49%, young adults ages 18-29 were the most affected by food insecurity. Concurrently, 44% of those currently enrolled in higher education were also food insecure.

Results suggest that the LGBTQIA+ community may be disproportionately affected by food insecurity, as well. Nearly 46% of respondents who identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual or some identity other than straight were living in food insecure households.

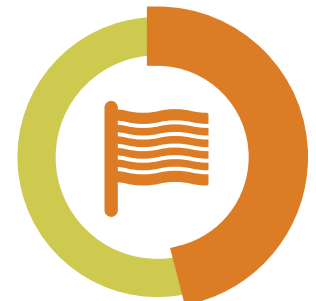
► **FOOD INSECURITY AND HEALTH**

Health status was significantly associated with a household’s food insecurity status. Among individuals with poor or very poor health, 56% were food insecure. At the same time, individuals with a mobility disability that prevented them from going to the store for food experienced similar levels of food insecurity.

Among those experiencing food insecurity, over 60% described either delaying filling prescriptions or taking less medicine in order to save money. This suggests that those living in food insecure households may cut back on other basic needs, like healthcare, to save for food.



44% OF THOSE ENROLLED IN HIGHER EDUCATION WERE FOOD INSECURE



46% OF THOSE IDENTIFYING AS LGBTQIA+ WERE FOOD INSECURE

With an increasing number of non-traditional college students, including parents who’ve returned to school, first-generation students and those who are working full-time, **college food insecurity levels are concerning.**



56% OF THOSE WITH POOR OR VERY POOR HEALTH WERE FOOD INSECURE



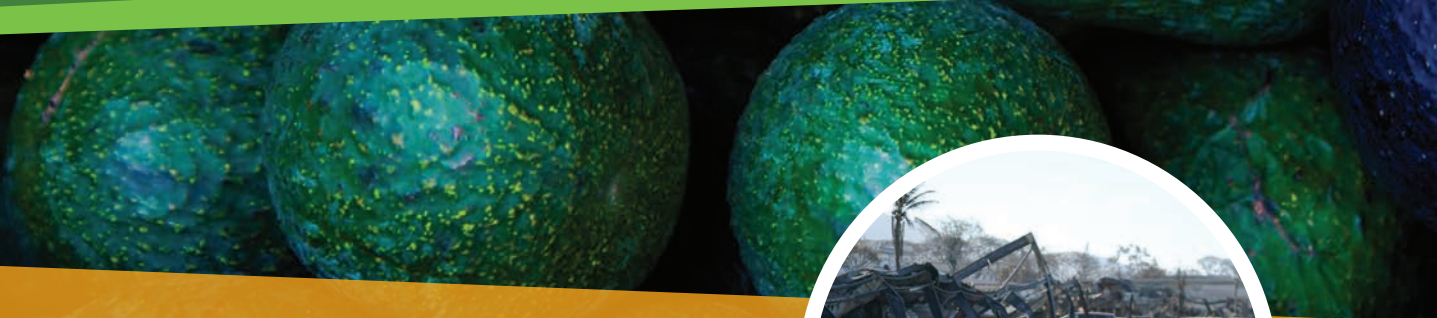
64% DELAYED FILLING PRESCRIPTIONS TO SAVE MONEY



60% OF THOSE WITH HEARING DIFFICULTIES WERE FOOD INSECURE



74% OF THOSE WITH VISION DIFFICULTIES WERE FOOD INSECURE



► UTILIZATION OF SERVICES

This survey also provided insights on the utilization of free food services through the food banks' hunger-relief networks, including opportunities like food pantries or churches. One-quarter of households had at least one member who received free groceries from one of these places, but most did so only once or twice in a year.

Among those that expressed experiencing food insecurity, 69% did not receive free food services because they did not know where to get them. Similarly, 65% did not get free groceries because they did not feel comfortable doing so. This suggests that a person's discomfort, such as feelings of shame or embarrassment, may prevent individuals from seeking out food assistance, even if they need it.

Mobility challenges and food insecurity were also exemplified, indicating that those who did not drive a car – whether due to physical limitations or lack of resources – were more likely to come from food insecure households.

Based on the results, over half of the respondents did not know a place in their community to get free groceries or meals. This indicates that a barrier to getting free food when it is needed may be a lack of knowledge about where to go for such assistance.

► MAUI WILDFIRES

The survey considered impacts from the wildfires that took place on Maui in August 2023. About 20% of Hawai'i residents were affected by the wildfires to one degree or another, such as having lost a family member, friend, property and/or job. Among the households affected by the wildfires, 49% experienced food insecurity – highlighting the importance of developing proactive disaster preparedness and response plans within the community.

1 in 5 Hawai'i residents

were affected by the Maui wildfires.



Transportation limitations, lack of knowledge, and feelings of shame or embarrassment prevented people from seeking out food assistance, even if they needed it.



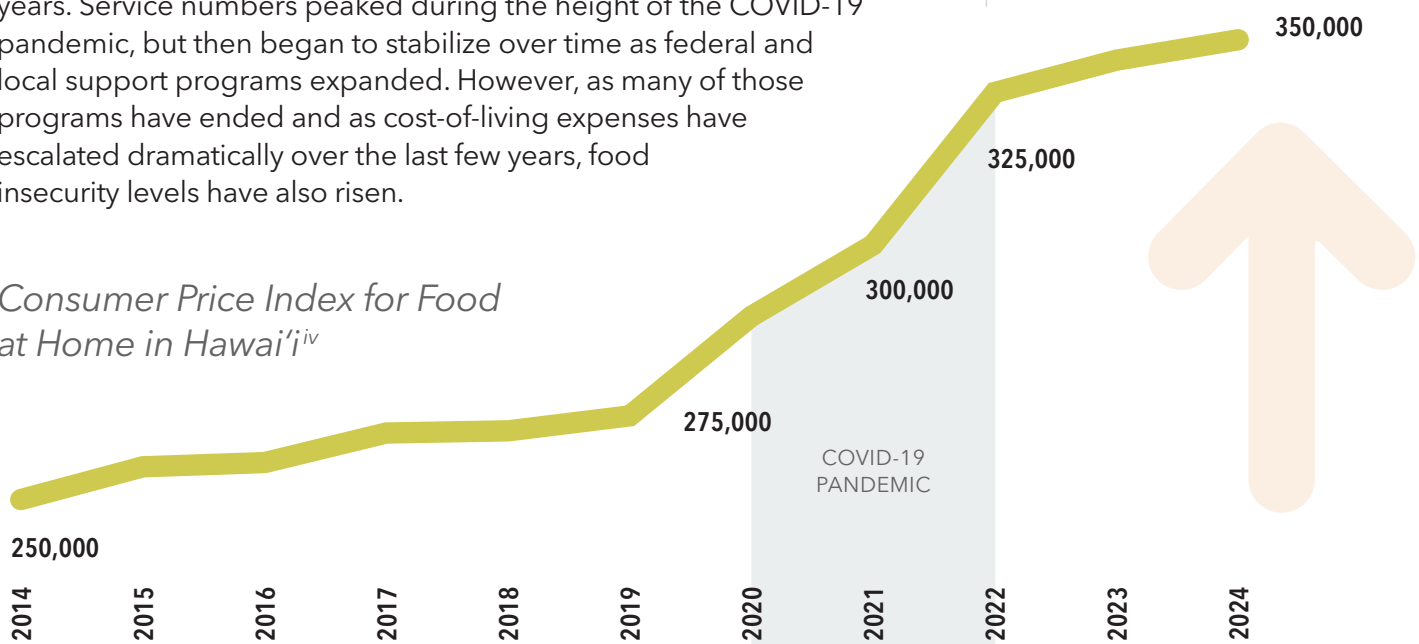
CONCLUSION

Overall, *The State of Food Insecurity in Hawai'i* is the first report of its kind to comprehensively evaluate food insecurity in Hawai'i using the full US HFSSM, and it provides critical insights for programs and policies seeking to improve food security. The findings from the report suggest that, at 30%, food insecurity in Hawai'i is a significant issue.

The estimates in the report support what many of Hawai'i Foodbank's staff and frontline agency partners have reported over the last few years. Service numbers peaked during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, but then began to stabilize over time as federal and local support programs expanded. However, as many of those programs have ended and as cost-of-living expenses have escalated dramatically over the last few years, food insecurity levels have also risen.

Since the pandemic, Hawai'i has seen an average increase of 25% in food prices.

Consumer Price Index for Food at Home in Hawai'i^{iv}





This fluctuation in food insecurity levels and the subsequent strengthening and weakening of safety net programs tell a story about how policies and programs can help people persevere during times of crisis. This trend also suggests that addressing the needs of individuals experiencing food insecurity goes beyond food.

For individuals and families in Hawai'i that are experiencing hardship, food insecurity is often the result of trade-offs between non-negotiable costs of living that impede their ability to afford food. As a result, many individuals find themselves in the precarious situation of choosing between food and other basic needs. This often means opting for cheaper, unhealthier food options or skipping meals, altogether. On the other end, individuals may choose to forego essential needs like housing, medicine, utilities and transportation.

► CASE STUDY: AVERAGE NUMBER OF INDIVIDUALS SERVED PER MONTH AND TOTAL POUNDS OF FOOD DISTRIBUTED

January through March, O'ahu

 **153,000** average served per month
 **4.6** million pounds distributed

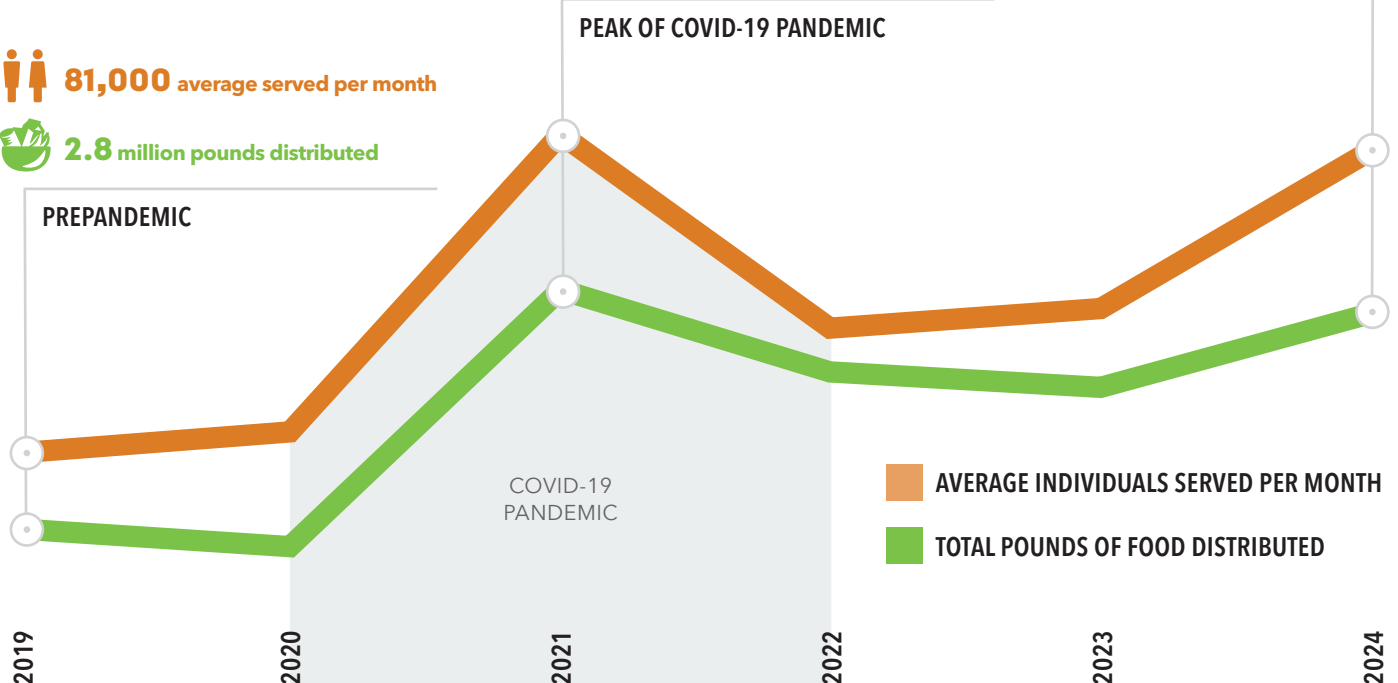
CURRENT OUTLOOK:

Hawai'i Foodbank's service numbers went from an average of 115,843 people per month in 2023 to 153,291 people per month in 2024 – representing a 28% increase and numbers not seen since the peak of the pandemic.

In the last year, the number of people served each month has **increased by 28%**.

 **156,000** average served per month
 **4.9** million pounds distributed

 **81,000** average served per month
 **2.8** million pounds distributed



► THE LARGER IMPLICATIONS OF FOOD INSECURITY

Taken all together, food insecurity presents complex, long-term challenges linked to many negative health and socioeconomic outcomes, and, with 30% of Hawaii's households considered food insecure, represents a major problem for the state.

Most immediately, people living in food insecure homes experience challenges in accessing nutritious foods and face barriers to consistently adopting healthy eating patterns. A poor-quality diet that lacks nutritious food harms a person's physical and mental health.^v

Long-term, food insecurity is associated with a higher probability of chronic disease, including the following: hypertension, coronary heart disease, hepatitis, stroke, cancer, asthma, diabetes, arthritis, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and kidney disease.^{vi} It has also been demonstrated that people facing food insecurity may experience higher rates of mental health issues, including depression, anxiety and sleep disorders.^{vii}

In the end, food insecurity is not only detrimental to individual health and well-being, but it also presents a serious public health problem for the entire community. When extrapolated, these considerations take a serious toll on health care resources and the economy. In the U.S., food insecurity is associated with an additional \$1,863 in health care costs annually.^{viii} For Hawaii, at an estimated food insecurity rate of 30%, that translates to \$800 million per year in added health care costs.



For Hawai'i, food insecurity is associated with \$800 million per year in added health care costs.



6% of Hawai'i households with children had one or more children go a whole day without food.

Of particular concern are the well-documented links between food insecurity and poor child health and behavioral outcomes. Food insecurity negatively impacts children at every age. Children 3 and younger who experience food insecurity "cannot learn as much, as fast or as well because chronic undernutrition harms their cognitive development during this critical period of rapid brain growth, changing the fundamental neurological architecture of the brain and central nervous system." At older ages, food insecure children are not only more susceptible to becoming sick, but they can also suffer from other additional physical, developmental and cognitive impairments – resulting in lower academic achievement than that of their peers.^{ix}



THE STATE OF FOOD INSECURITY IN HAWAI'I



► CREATING SOLUTIONS

These findings not only provide a more complete picture of the individuals and families experiencing food insecurity in Hawai'i, but they also shed light on the unique struggles Hawai'i faces as an entire community.

Food insecurity is not only a social determinant of negative health outcomes, but it is also a symptom of economic hardship and structural disparity. It is a complex issue that cannot be solved with one singular approach nor by one entity alone. Rather, effective solutions to alleviating food insecurity must be a shared community responsibility – one that unites the efforts of food banks with both the public and private sector to ignite change.



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ABOUT HAWAII FOODBANK

As Hawaii's largest hunger-relief organization, Hawaii Foodbank works collaboratively with a network of more than 225 agency partners on O'ahu and Kaua'i, along with affiliate food banks The Food Basket and Maui Food Bank, to provide food assistance to the State of Hawaii. Hawaii Foodbank is currently serving nearly 160,000 people each month and, last year, distributed food for nearly 17 million nutritious meals – a quarter of which was fresh, healthy produce.

Hawaii Foodbank stands ready with its network of hunger-relief partners across the state to develop targeted, collaborative and comprehensive strategies to continue to meet the community's immediate needs while also working to expand its long-term impact. Key priorities include:



STRONG PARTNERSHIPS: Hawaii Foodbank's mission is only possible because of its network of agency partners and affiliate food banks across the state. Hawaii Foodbank is committed to being a collaborative partner across its broad hunger-relief network, better supporting its partners, and engaging in collective food security efforts.



DISASTER PREPAREDNESS AND RESPONSE: As a proactive leader in disaster preparedness and response, Hawaii Foodbank is investing in its own capacity with a focus on preparedness across its network as well as strengthening its partnerships with government agencies and first responders.



NUTRITION AND HEALTH: Hawaii Foodbank is committed to being the healthy option for those experiencing food insecurity by increasing healthy food options, investing in local agriculture and culturally relevant foods, and expanding learning opportunities around nutrition.



EXPANDING EFFORTS TO END HUNGER: Hawaii Foodbank is broadening its approach to address the root causes of hunger, focusing on equitable access, filling gaps in service, and advocating for economic and financial supports that help people access healthy foods.



Our **MISSION**

At Hawai'i Foodbank, our mission is to nourish our 'ohana today while we work to end hunger tomorrow.

▶ NOTES AND REFERENCES

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