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Apr 18th, 10:50 AM - 11:10 AM

### The Faces of Helena Food Share: Beyond Stereotype

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Youngblood, Winifred H., "The Faces of Helena Food Share: Beyond Stereotype" (2015). *UM Graduate Student Research Conference (GradCon)*. 3.

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According to Feed America's *Map the Meal Gap 2014*, approximately 7,320 individuals or twelve percent of the population in Lewis and Clark County, Montana are uncertain where the next meal will come from and if the food will be safe and nutritionally adequate. Inadequate nutrition, both quantity and quality, is a public health problem that has far ranging effects, including increased risks of chronic disease and depression, poor cognitive development in children, and low income due to under-education or missing work because of illness. Helena Food Share (HFS) is a community resource that strives to ameliorate these problems. As the food pantry for the greater Helena area, HFS provides nutritious fresh, frozen, and canned emergency groceries for anyone who asks. In Fiscal Year (FY) 2013, the pantry served 7,149 clients, adults and children, from Lewis and Clark County alone. Over 600 more came from adjacent counties. Communities may have preconceived ideas about who uses food pantries or food banks. This research seeks to dispel stereotypes such as most clients of Helena Food Share live in low-income housing, are chronically unemployed young adults, have lots of children, and routinely rely on HFS as a source of food. In fact, difficulty accessing adequate nutrition knows no geographic or socio-economic boundaries.

In this project, the author describes the clientele who use Helena Food Share. The primary method of investigation is quantitative analysis of HFS client data for FYs 2013 and 2014. Descriptors analyzed for FY 2013 include age of head of household, household size, and physical location of household. The descriptors for FY 2014 include employment status of the head household, age of all clients, household size, and how many times households shopped at the pantry over a year. Qualitative methods used include the author's observations and clients' anecdotes collected during a Master of Public Health practicum experience at Helena Food Share from September 2013 through June 2014.

Helena Food Share provided food for 3779 households comprised of 7,764 clients in FY 2013. The analysis resulted in four general findings. First, 816 heads of household (22 percent) are age sixty years or older. Seventy five percent of them live alone, and the average age is 69 years old. Second, although household sizes range from one to nine individuals, 76 percent of clients live in households of four or fewer individuals. Fifty percent live in two- to four- person households. While 26 percent of clients live in single-person households, this group represents 54 percent of all households. Less than nine percent of individuals, (i.e., less than four percent of households), live in households with six or more people. Third, Ninety-six percent of households with a physical address live in Helena, East Helena, and the immediately adjacent valley of each. The city of Helena is home to 59 percent of households with 3,793 clients. And fourth, an unexpected finding is that homeless clients represent less than two percent of all clients served. Final results of the FY 2014 client data analysis are pending because work is still in progress.

While literature exists about who uses food pantries in general, there appears to be no comprehensive analysis for the Helena area. The findings resulting from the FY 2013 analysis offer an incomplete description of Helena Food Share clients due to missing data, most notably the reason for using the pantry, ages of everyone in the household and employment status of the head of household and, when applies, the second responsible adult/parent. This information will be available for FY 2014. Beyond the numbers are the stories of the clients. The author had conversations with hundreds of clients and heard accounts of self-recrimination for not being able to care for their families, of suddenly losing a State job

because of no money in the State budget and having no savings, of medical emergencies, of military families with deployed spouses, of working two jobs and still not able to buy food for the family at the end of the month, and many more. Understanding who uses Helena Food Share may help the greater Helena community grow its already generous financial support as well as help relieve the unnecessary shame, guilt and denial of individuals who have not yet walked through its doors. Unbeknownst to many, their neighbors and friends sometimes need long-term or short-term assistance with feeding themselves and their families. The author is one of those neighbors and friends.