

# Policy Brief: Improving culturally-sensitive foods in food support programs for American Indian families in Minnesota



## Intro:



Despite widely available state and federal food assistance programs, **American Indian communities in Minnesota experience greater food insecurity than the rest of the population.** Addressing this specific challenge American Indian communities face will pave the way for a healthier future and give their families equitable opportunities to thrive.



*“We live in a food desert. There is no grocery store, so most people live out of the gas station. It’s easier to get drugs than food.” -From the film Gather*



A major contributing factor to the food insecurity faced by American Indian populations is the **lack of access to culturally appropriate traditional foods.** While a high percentage of the American Indian population utilizes food banks, food pantries, and state programs, **families will not use food assistance programs to their full extent if they don’t offer familiar, traditional, and culturally appropriate foods.**

## Problem:



## Solution:



Increase traditional American Indian foods in food support programs, food pantries, and food banks.

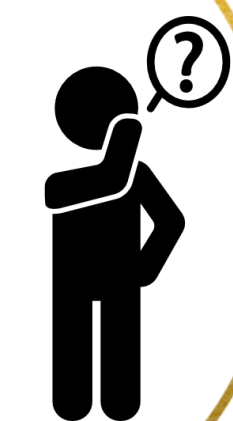
## What is food insecurity:

*"The limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods.<sup>1</sup>"*

## What is a food desert:

*"A low-income geographical area where a substantial portion of residents have low access to a supermarket or large grocery store that is more than 1 mile away in an urban area or more than 10 miles in rural areas.<sup>2</sup>"*

## Why does it matter?



The portion of American Indians suffering from food insecurity is startling when compared to that of Americans in general. **Almost all Minnesota reservations are considered food deserts.** Not only do those who live in food deserts have limited access to supermarkets that have an abundance of food options, but many have relatively easy access to convenience stores and fast food restaurants, where little fresh, traditional foods are offered contributing to communities of people with poor diets and higher levels of obesity and diet-related disease such as diabetes and heart disease.<sup>3</sup> In addition, **American Indians deal with strict habitat laws and experience poor growing conditions which limits their ability to grow traditional foods on reservations.** There is a true need to help our American Indians have better access to more culturally appropriate food.

# BY THE NUMBERS: CHALLENGES THE AMERICAN INDIAN COMMUNITY FACES

## 1 IN 4

One in four American Indians are food insecure compared to one in eight Americans.<sup>4</sup>

## 60%

60% of American Indian children under age 6 are enrolled in SNAP compared to 7.3% of Minnesotans in general.<sup>5</sup>

## 7th Worst

Minnesota ranks 7th worst in the nation for the proportion of residents with food insecurity.<sup>6</sup>



# Be A Part of the Solution

## Local level:

- Work with local food banks to have **increased storage capacity for fresh traditional foods**.
  - Many traditional foods are fresh and would need better refrigeration.
- **Increasing the number of food pantries with fresh food storage** will help increase availability of fresh culturally relevant food.
  - Increase the number of farmers markets that accept SNAP.
- **Provide incentives** for selling indigenous foods at farmers markets.
- **Develop farm to food bank networks**.
  - A farm to food bank initiative helps connect farmers, transportation providers, volunteers, and food banks to help reduce hunger and food waste.
- Work with tribal and city councils to **create garden spaces for local fresh traditional foods**.
  - Link tribal farmers to local food pantries to provide indigenous foods for their communities.

## State Level:

- **Establish food banks** with closer proximity to reservations
- Have the **healthy and culturally relevant foods** as the first thing recipients see so they are more likely to fill their carts with these foods over unhealthy alternatives.
  - Programs like SuperShelf can help here to provide training for vendors. SuperShelf trains and assists food shelves in the Six Steps to SuperShelf Systems Change, which includes creating standards and introducing techniques that promote healthy eating.
  - Can partner with SuperShelf to incorporate the promotion and training on traditional foods and their importance.
- **Collaborate with SNAP leaders** to provide SNAP training on what defines indigenous foods for American Indians.
  - Offer training on the importance of offering traditional foods to American Indians and this relationship to food insecurity.
  - Provide training on what foods classify as indigenous to American Indians.

## References:

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