Allegany County Community Food Security Report
September 2026

Executive Summary

Throughout 2026, The Western Maryland Food Council collected data on food access using CARAT (Community & Agriculture Resilience Audit Tool). This data, as well as data collected during the Allegany County Food Security Program grant from May-July, was used to create the Allegany County Community Food Security Report. The CARAT tool provides a framework to help develop a comprehensive assessment of the county's food security infrastructure, examining both existing assets and critical needs.

Methods used included direct surveys, interviews, and focus group discussions targeting county food pantries, feeding programs, community gardens, farmers, public school gardens, school pantries, and key stakeholders.

This assessment reveals a county with strengths in school-based food security programming, food distributions, and regional coordination through the Western Maryland Food Council. Persistent challenges include infrastructure, transportation, formal farm and restaurant partnerships, and meaningful engagement of food-insecure residents in planning processes.

The Food Security Landscape: Assets and Infrastructure



Photo: George's Creek Elementary School Garden, July 2026 Photo by Andy Valentine

Schools as Food Security Hubs

Allegany County's public community schools have evolved into food security hubs that extend far beyond traditional meal programs. In addition to serving free breakfast and lunch to all students (approximately 8,100) in Allegany County Public Schools, among the 17 community schools in Allegany County, all have established on-site school garden infrastructures, with multiple schools able to establish sustainable gardens, greenhouses, and hydroponic systems to produce food for students and the surrounding community. Most schools operate food pantries, and several engage in food waste recovery programs to keep expired food out of landfills. Despite the end of the SNAP-Ed program, some schools were able to continue nutrition education programming. This represents a commitment to student food security that extends well beyond the classroom.

All 17 schools, from Beall Elementary to Westside Elementary— have garden infrastructure that spans the spectrum from simple container gardens to standard raised beds and greenhouses, to sophisticated indoor hydroponic grow systems, although all are not functioning. The more advanced installations reveal the district's commitment to innovation: five schools operate hydroponic systems that allow year-round growing, and three maintain full greenhouse facilities (Fort Hill, George's Creek, and Mount Savage).

One successful school food security hub in Allegany County is operated by Bishop Walsh School, a private K-12 institution, and managed by the student agriculture club. Bishop Walsh has pioneered an aquaponic system that integrates fish cultivation with plant production for year-round harvests. The school has also established a successful seedling program, producing seedlings in the school greenhouse which are sold to the community during their annual spring plant sale. The aquaponic lab produces a weekly harvest of lettuces, herbs, and tomatoes sufficient to not only supply fresh produce eaten by students in the school cafeteria, but also to the local food system through Wholesome Harvest Food Co-Op, The Community Café, and the Union Rescue Mission - demonstrating a viable school-to-community food pipeline.

Beyond gardens, the schools function as distribution points for food security services. George's Creek Elementary piloted an innovative farmers market initiative—now adopted by other community schools—in which schools host summer farmers markets and provide families with vouchers, creating a dual benefit for both producers and food-insecure families. The summer backpack program operates at 16 schools, ensuring food access continues when classes are not in session. Two schools exemplify this integrated approach: South Penn Elementary, through its monthly “Pantry-on-the-Go" popup, held every third Thursday and funded through braided resources from the Judy Center, Salvation Army, and Community Schools initiative; and Beall Elementary, through its onsite food pantry restocked daily, and weekly program to offer Beall Elementary families food vouchers at the Frostburg Farmer’s Market, coordinated by the school’s dedicated community school coordinator.

The district has also maintained nutrition education programming despite the loss of SNAP-ED funding by contracting with a former SNAP-Ed educator, to provide healthy tastings and programming in some schools—a creative solution to preserve essential services when federal support disappeared. The Allegany Health Department’s SNAP/CSA program provided produce boxes called “Community Farmers Bounty

Boxes” at George’s Creek Elementary School, the Allegany Health Department, and is expanding to Flintstone Elementary School

Nutrition Education and Workforce Development

Beyond schools, multiple organizations provide nutrition education and culinary training across Allegany County. The Allegany County Health Department Nutrition Program, UPMC Western Maryland Outpatient Nutrition Clinic, and University of Maryland Extension's Family and Consumer Sciences, Agriculture, and 4-H programs teach nutrition education classes throughout the community. The Career Center has a culinary program; Allegany College of Maryland offers a Hospitality Management and Culinary Arts Degree Program. Frostburg State University maintains a teaching kitchen, and the Evergreen Heritage Center provides nutrition education programming in schools and in the community. Health insurance companies, the Housing and Rural Development Corporation, and libraries collaborate with these organizations to expand program reach.

The August 2025 elimination of federal SNAP-ED funding represents a significant loss to the county's nutrition education infrastructure. These programs provided crucial education about healthy eating on limited budgets, cooking skills, and food resource management to the populations most affected by food insecurity. While organizations like the schools have found creative workarounds through private contracts and partnerships, the federal funding loss has reduced overall program availability and reach. Organizations that previously offered SNAP-ED programming, including the University of Maryland Extension and community health programs, have had to curtail services or seek alternative funding sources.

Community Pantry Network and Additional Food Programs

Among food pantries, hundreds of fresh produce boxes and pantry staple boxes are distributed to county residents each month. In addition, nearly a thousand freshly prepared hot meals are distributed monthly through church feeding programs.

Human Resource Development Commission (HRDC) serves meals through their Head Start, Senior Centers, and My Groceries to Go programs. Nourishing Neighbors, a free fresh produce distribution and resource exchange, funded by a grant through Potomac Highlands United Way, in collaboration with the Appalachian Farm and Food Alliance/Western MD Food Council, provides 75-125 local produce boxes at 5 locations in Allegany County. Lastly, all six Allegany County Public Library branches (Washington Street, South Cumberland, LaVale, Frostburg, George’s Creek, and Westernport) have established onsite seed libraries, maintained by University of MD Extension (UME), to provide an additional opportunity for fresh, affordable produce to residents. The Allegany County Library received a grant, Grow It, Cook It, Eat It, which provides additional nutrition and gardening education, and a Library of Things, including many cooking tools that can be checked out by library patrons.

Over two dozen food pantries and feeding programs form the backbone of Allegany County's emergency food system, anchored by the Western Maryland Food Bank's

Cumberland warehouse, the only Redistribution Organization (RDO) in the county capable of distributing to both individuals and other agencies. In 2025, the Food Bank distributed 1.5 million pounds of food, serving 10,000-15,000 people monthly while providing 860 backpack bags weekly and equipping partner agencies to serve 200-400 additional households each week. The organization maintains formal retail recovery partnerships with Martins, Sheetz, and 7-Eleven, collecting unsold products three to five times weekly. The Food Bank also offers shopping carts with stair-climbing wheels and hosts evening popups to accommodate working schedules—practical solutions to access barriers.

Maryland Food Bank provides food through food distributions, including 4 pantry-on-the-go locations, and one mobile market. Union Rescue Mission provides 3 meals per day to anyone in the community. The Community Cafe, Maryland’s only pay-what-you-can restaurant, provides lunches 3 days per week.

The United Methodist Church in Flintstone operates a four-church collaborative ministry connecting Flintstone, Murley Branch, Prosperity, and Mt Herman congregations—a model that demonstrates how smaller rural churches can pool resources for greater impact. This pantry received one of the Western Maryland Food Council's cold storage grants, which catalyzed measurable community response: the grant inspired a local donor to contribute $500 specifically for fresh food purchasing, demonstrating how visible infrastructure investment can leverage additional community funding.

United Methodist Church in LaVale mobilizes more than 30 volunteers to collect, sort, pack, and distribute food boxes eight times annually per household, supported by cold storage infrastructure from a WMFC grant and fresh produce from the Christ Lutheran Community Garden. Christ Lutheran Church's Reach Meal program has scaled to serve over 400 meals every month through an assembly-line packing system and volunteer driver network that delivers to shut-ins—addressing not just food insecurity but also social isolation among homebound residents.

America's Hauling for Hope fills a critical gap by delivering groceries directly to households unable to reach food pantries, operating across four Maryland counties: Allegany, Washington, Frederick, and Carroll. Since September 2025, the organization has partnered with the Maryland Food Bank and a local Sheetz through the Retail Recovery program, collecting approximately 150 pounds of past-sale-date food weekly for distribution. America's Hauling for Hope also partners with Maryland Physicians Care, ACHD, and UMPC to provide recipes based on the food distributed, connecting food access with nutrition education.

Tri-Town Pantry serves the unique tri-state area of Westernport, Barton, and Piedmont, West Virginia, providing 50 pounds of food monthly to households. St. John’s Lutheran Church in South Cumberland is positioned to expand significantly with its large kitchen facility and is actively planning a farm-to-institution pilot with South Penn Elementary for Fall 2026.

Both Frostburg State University, and Allegany College of Maryland operate on-campus food pantries specifically addressing student food insecurity. Interfaith Community Pantry in Cumberland supplements distribution with redeemable grocery vouchers for

Save a Lot Queen City, and summer home garden donations. Our Lady of the Mountains Catholic parishes operate St. Anthony Place as a walk-in pantry three times yearly without requiring social services registration—reducing barriers for residents who may hesitate to access traditional assistance programs.

Senior Meal Sites and Home-Delivered Meals are provided by HRDC and provide nourishing food and socialization. They provide the benefits of the Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) benefits. The Department of Social Services oversees the SNAP food assistance program. The Allegany County Health Department houses the WIC (Women's, Infants Children) Program, which provides supplemental food assistance, breastfeeding support, and a Farmers Market Nutrition Program. The Allegany Farmers Market oversees the Maryland Department of Agriculture's Maryland Money Market Program that doubles dollars spent up to $20 per visit at the Allegany Farmers Markets in downtown Cumberland and Frostburg.

AHEC-West's Healthy Together Program provides food boxes, and their Possibility Shop provides food and other resources and helps connect clients with services.

Community Gardens and Growing Capacity

Four community gardens provide residents with hands-on growing opportunities while supporting the broader food system. Christ Lutheran Church in LaVale operates a dual model with both beds for rent and volunteer-maintained beds dedicated to producing for UMC LaVale's food boxes, supported by monthly public education sessions led by University of Maryland Extension (UME) Master Gardener Coordinator.

The Barton Church Community Garden operates a free, public-access model in a healthy food priority area. The Vine Avenue Community Garden, managed by the NAACP next to Cumberland's Constitution Park, specifically serves low-income neighborhoods where yard space for private gardens is limited. UPMC manages one community garden and maintains a waitlist, indicating demand exceeds current capacity—a signal that expansion of community garden infrastructure would find participants. The Jane Gates Garden, part of the Gates Heritage Foundation, provides additional community growing space and partners with University of Maryland Extension (UME) Master Gardeners and Westside School for education opportunities.

The county's growing infrastructure extends beyond traditional gardens. University of Maryland Extension (UME) Master Gardeners have a demonstration garden at their Cumberland office location for educational sessions, and works with local libraries to maintain seed libraries that provide free seeds specifically selected to perform well in the region—removing a barrier for residents who want to grow food but cannot afford seed purchases.

Additionally, the Western Correctional Institution (WCI) in Cresaptown operates a well-established gardening program, in partnership with the nonprofit NatureSacred, that teaches horticultural skills to inmates while donating harvested food to the Western Maryland Food Bank. This program serves multiple community goals: workforce development, rehabilitation, and food security.

Innovation and Partnership Models

Several programs demonstrate innovative approaches to food security challenges. Maryland Market Money doubles SNAP benefits at Cumberland and Frostburg Farmers Markets, effectively increasing food purchasing power for low-income residents. The four-church ministry model pioneered in Flintstone shows how collaborative approaches can strengthen capacity in rural areas where individual congregations lack resources to operate standalone programs. The partnership between Christ Lutheran's community garden and UMC LaVale's pantry has created a direct garden-to-pantry pipeline for fresh produce, ensuring locally grown food reaches those experiencing food insecurity.

Mobile distribution has emerged as a key strategy for reaching residents in transportation-limited areas. The Allegany County Health Department operates a Heal Mobile that travels throughout the county on regular, advertised schedules, while the Food Bank hosts multiple popups including evening sessions accessible to working residents. These mobile approaches recognize that bringing food to people may be more feasible than solving the county's underlying transportation infrastructure limitations. The Allegany Farmers Market received a NourishMD grant for a “veggie van” to bring the farmers market to healthy food priority areas.

The Western Maryland Food Bank operates a storage and distribution warehouse in Cumberland, serving as a critical infrastructure anchor for the county's emergency food network. This local facility complements the Maryland Food Bank's regional warehouse in Hagerstown, creating a two-tier distribution system that enables more responsive local coordination. During the May 2025 Lonaconing flood, the Food Bank demonstrated this coordination capacity by leveraging its relationship with the Maryland Food Bank to achieve a two-day turnaround in meeting needs and enabling a sustained local response. In the same flood event, America's Hauling for Hope partnered with Maryland Physicians Care and the Western Maryland Food Bank to deliver three trucks loaded with food to the Bruce Outreach Center in Westernport—showing how multiple organizations can rapidly mobilize when disaster strikes, even without formalized emergency plans.

Garrett Growers represents an innovative farm aggregation model, successfully distributing local produce across Allegany and Garrett Counties and into West Virginia. Multiple farms have formed cohorts to sell into wholesale markets like Frostburg State University, with Honeymoon Farm successfully navigating the institutional procurement process—demonstrating that farmer partnerships can overcome barriers that individual producers cannot address alone. At least one farm delivers CSA shares within a 50-mile radius, creating direct farm-to-consumer relationships that proved resilient during the 2020-2021 pandemic when CSA farms and cooperatives reliably had chicken and other products even when supermarkets experienced shortages.

Regional Coordination Through the Western Maryland Food Council

The Western Maryland Food Council, officially launched in December 2016, coordinates food system development across Washington, Allegany, and Garrett Counties. The council has convened three major regional food conferences (2019, 2022, and 2024) and established county workgroups in each jurisdiction to facilitate local collaboration. WMFC membership includes diverse stakeholders: community members, health departments, economic development agencies, University of Maryland Extension,

hospitals, farmers, food banks, and other food system partners. The council's work has helped establish "social determinants of health" as common language among regional organizations, improving cross-sector understanding of food security challenges.

WMFC has implemented several practical initiatives including the "Buy Local" campaign that aggregates information about regional farms and food resources, regional food assessment efforts using the Community and Agriculture Resilience Audit Tool (CARAT), and the cold storage grant program that has already demonstrated measurable impact. However, stakeholders noted that early farmer participation has declined over time. Planning staff in county government lack food systems expertise, limiting the council's ability to influence policy and zoning decisions that affect food production and distribution. The absence or decreased numbers of farmers, processors, distributors, and procurement specialists from recent council activities suggests a need to re-engage agricultural producers in regional food system planning.

Survey respondents identified opportunities for WMFC to expand its reach through strategic partnerships with existing county bodies. One survey respondent recommended that the Western Maryland Food Council give a presentation to the Allegany County Children's Council, noting that this body includes many state agency representatives and meets monthly with awareness of community challenges. The Allegany County Community School Coordinators' advisory group and the ACPS "Ag PAC" agriculture advisory community represent additional venues where food council presence could strengthen cross-sector collaboration. The new school superintendent has shown active interest in food systems, attending both a farm field trip and the first Ag PAC meeting of the year. These observations suggest an opportunity to systematically expand WMFC's integration with existing governance structures rather than operating as a parallel entity.

Allegany County Farm Perspectives

Direct surveys of four Allegany County farms—Fish Holler, Greise's Farm, Palmyra Farm, and Turkey Foot Farm—reveal consistent themes about challenges and opportunities in local agricultural production. The most frequently cited barrier across all farmer surveys was inadequate communication about available programs, grants, and market opportunities. As one farmer noted, "Every department is disconnected! Nothing is easily accessible. Be it searching for the grant application, to an organization that approves different aspects of farming." This communication gap means farmers often discover programs through outside sources rather than direct outreach, missing opportunities that could strengthen their operations.

Funding structure creates additional barriers. Current grant programs typically require farmers to pay costs upfront and seek reimbursement later—a cash flow challenge for producers whose income depends on selling what they grow. One farmer observed that this structure makes grants "easier for those with available investment funds to get... than a farmer trying to get income from farming." FSA loans, while available, were described as "too limited to allow farming improvement."

Despite these challenges, farmers reported positive experiences with specific programs. Turkey Foot Farm participated in an Allegany County Health Department grant

distributing CSA boxes to SNAP recipients and expressed interest in continuing such programs. Fish Holler Farm cited valuable learning from Wholesome Harvest Co-op programming about institutional sales. Palmyra Farm praised University of Maryland Extension for being "accessible and eager to help" with questions. These success stories suggest that when programs effectively reach farmers, they can create meaningful impact.

However, institutional purchasing remains a persistent challenge. Turkey Foot Farm is listed as a Maryland local producer for state institutions but reports that local institutions "do not seem to be participating as far as I can tell." Multiple farmers emphasized that local government, nonprofits, and institutions need to actively purchase from local farmers—not just maintain lists of approved vendors. The most striking observation came from Greise's Farm: "Local farmers are not producing in Allegany County. The ones who do, take meats to auction barn for big growers to take to feed lots who process for box meats." This suggests a fundamental disconnect between local production capacity and local consumption infrastructure that warrants attention in regional food system planning.

Grocery, Convenience, and Corner Stores

Allegany County has 30 grocery stores, convenience stores, and corner stores. These include:

Caporale’s Bakery, Ellie’s Deli, B&B Meats, Stafford’s Grocery and Greenhouse, Martin’s (Cumberland and LaVale), Dollar Tree (Virginia Ave, LaVale, Oldtown, and Frostburg), 7-11 (Maryland Ave and Frostburg), Circle K (McMullen Hwy and Oldtown), Ollie’s LaVale, PitNGo (Frederick St and McMullen Hwy), Save A Lot (Industrial Blvd, Queen City, and Frostburg), Weis Frostburg, Walmart LaVale, Love’s Cumberland, and Sheetz (store #41, #46, #51, #59, #62, #129, and #167).

The number of small grocery and convenience stores in Allegany County has decreased. Corner stores and delis that commonly dotted every neighborhood as the go-to for affordable ready-to-eat foods, have given way for larger, commercial stores. That said, neighborhoods with small groceries or convenience stores enjoy greater food security, than those who must travel more than ten miles to the nearest grocer.

One owner of a corner store in South Cumberland for the past 15 years, noted that things were easier for the grocer to offer a better selection and price point to consumers when more small, independent food stores were open. When her store was one of several corner stores, these stores would pool their buying power with retail suppliers by placing orders together. Now, as the last independent grocer in her area, she is limited to what fresh items she can order. If the price in her store is too high, local people won’t buy it and she will have more expired food.

Cooking Habits Survey

Between January and April 2025, Maryland Physicians Care (MPC), as part of an Allegany County Health Department’s Disparity Grant, completed a Cooking Habits Survey. The survey consisted of 15 questions, and 69 surveys were completed at the

Allegany County Health Department's Nutrition and WIC programs, Hope Station Pantry, Allegany College Pantry, and by MPC members in Allegany County.

Results include:

- 49.5% cook at home daily; 38.4% cook at home 4-5 times/week; 12.1% 2-3 times/week
- 35% report eating fruits and vegetables daily
- 42% said diet is fairly healthy
- What prevents you from cooking more healthy foods:
    - 68% said healthy foods are too expensive
- 97% have stove/oven; 83% have skillet/frying pan, 81% have baking pans/bakeware; 28% do not have a large pot for soup; 19% do not have a cutting board
- Most desired cooking equipment: pots and pans (20%), air fryer (18%), blender (16%)
- Cooking Skills Topics of Interest:
    - 80% Quick Meals on a Budget
    - 64% Cooking Healthy Meals
    - 61% Meal Planning and Shopping on a Budget
    - 33% Cooking Healthier Meals for Medical Conditions
- Health Conditions:
    - 67% Overweight
    - 51% Hypertension
    - 35% Diabetes
    - 16% Pre-Diabetes
- For the past 12 months, how often have you worried that your food would run out before you got money to buy more?
    - Often = 23%; Sometimes = 30%; Rarely = 22%

Critical Gaps and Systemic Challenges



Photo: Nourishing Neighbors free food box distribution at City Place, Frostburg, MD , June 2026 Photo by Andy Valentine

Cold Storage Infrastructure Deficit

The most frequently cited infrastructure gap across all surveys was inadequate cold storage capacity. While two pantries have benefited from WMFC cold storage grants—demonstrating measurable impact through the $500 catalyzed donation in Flintstone and expanded fresh food distribution in LaVale—multiple pantries expressed that refrigeration, and freezer capacity fundamentally limits their ability to accept donations.

St. John's Lutheran Church in South Cumberland specifically identified cold storage as a prerequisite for entering into farm partnerships, noting that without refrigeration, they cannot accept fresh produce or coordinate with growers who have surplus during harvest season—a constraint that affects their planned pilot with South Penn Elementary. Without adequate refrigeration, pantries cannot accept fresh produce donations, meat contributions, or farm surplus, forcing them to focus primarily on shelf-stable foods that offer less nutritional value and variety.

The economic logic is compelling: cold storage grants serve enable pantries to accept donations they would otherwise refuse, purchase fresh foods in bulk at lower costs, and store seasonal surplus for distribution during growing season gaps. The Flintstone example suggests that visible investment in infrastructure can catalyze additional local fundraising as community members see their pantry expanding capacity. Expanding cold storage grant opportunities to 3-5 additional pantries—prioritizing sites like St. John's Lutheran with large kitchen facilities and active farmer connections, Tri-Town

Pantry with its interest in formal farmer donation programs, and Interfaith Community Pantry—would strategically strengthen the county's fresh food infrastructure.

Transportation Barriers

Allegany County's very limited public bus routes create significant access barriers for residents without personal vehicles, restricting their ability to reach farmers' markets, pantries, and grocery stores offering fresh foods. This transportation gap particularly affects elderly residents, individuals with disabilities, and low-income households. Specialized transportation programs such as the Non-Emergency Medical Transportation (NEMT) program administered by the Allegany County Health Department and the Mobility Management program through the Human Resources Development Commission (HRDC) are only available for medical appointments rather than essential daily needs. As a result, residents relying on public transport are largely left without viable options for visiting local farmers markets and other food resources.

The March 2026 nutrition focus group emphasized this challenge repeatedly, with participants noting that even when quality food programs exist, lack of transportation prevents many residents from accessing them. Stakeholders noted the need for more community gardens within walking distance of low-income areas and healthy food priority areas—bringing production closer to consumers rather than requiring travel to distant retail sites.

Focus group participants noted that the county's very limited bus routes prevent many families from accessing farmers markets even when Maryland Market Money doubles their SNAP and Senior/WIC Farmers Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) benefits there. Beyond transportation infrastructure, timing creates additional barriers. The Allegany County Farmers Markets operates a Saturday Market that helps working families access local food. St. John's Lutheran's provision of little red wagons for food transport represents an innovative but limited response to a systemic problem.

Some transportation solutions have emerged. The Housing and Rural Development Corporation (HRDC) provides transportation to local grocery stores and, in some cases, to farmers markets. However, this service needs to be made more broadly available. Solutions require either bringing food to people or bringing people to food. Mobile pantry routes could reach transportation-limited residents on regular schedules, while food delivery partnerships might leverage existing infrastructure. America's Hauling for Hope's grocery delivery model demonstrates one viable approach.

Expanded public transportation to food sites represents a longer-term structural solution but would require coordination across multiple agencies and sustained funding. The emerging South Cumberland clergy coalition's planning for fresh produce distribution with South Penn Elementary suggests recognition of this gap among local stakeholders and willingness to develop workarounds until systematic solutions emerge. The Allegany Farmers Market Association was recently awarded a Nourish MD grant that will provide funding for an electric "Veggie Van" that will serve as a mobile farmers market going to underserved areas of the county.

Informal Farmer Relationships

Most farmer-pantry relationships in Allegany County operate informally, dependent on personal connections and individual growers' discretion rather than systematic programs with predictable supply. One farmer noted that their donations to the Flintstone pantry, occasional contributions to Tri-Town, and the Christ Lutheran garden's dedicated production for UMC LaVale represent the current model—valuable but limited and unpredictable. This informality creates several problems: pantries cannot plan menus or distribution around expected fresh food availability, farmers lack structured channels for surplus during peak harvest, and opportunities for gleaning from fields go unrealized due to lack of coordination infrastructure. A board member of the Community Café, the county's only pay-what-you-can restaurant, noted that there is a fundamental gap in connection between the people who can process, and the growers to reduce waste. Farmers don't necessarily know who to tell when they have an excess crop. They need a place to send info easily, and people to pick it up and process it. This communication gap means surplus food goes to waste while pantries struggle to source fresh produce.

A formal gleaning program with farmer-pantry matching systems would create reliable supply channels while addressing farmers' concerns about liability and logistics. Such a program would need to address an information gap identifying and creating an easy notification system when farmers have surplus, and coordination capacity to quickly connect that surplus with organizations able to accept and process it.

Maryland schools' local purchasing subsidy incentive creates financial encouragement for farm-to-institution procurement, which the planned South Penn-St. John's Lutheran pilot will test in fall 2026. If successful, this model could expand to hospitals, correctional facilities, and the Housing and Rural Development Corporation. A local food aggregation hub could consolidate purchasing power while simplifying logistics for farmers who currently must navigate relationships with multiple small-scale buyers.

Composting Infrastructure

Despite interest in composting—exemplified by George's Creek Elementary's active search for solutions to manage uneaten food—infrastructure remains limited though emerging. Some schools compost directly into their gardens, while Frostburg State University operates a "rocket composter" in its dining services department that converts food waste into usable compost. Clean Compost, a new company supporting Western Maryland businesses and communities with organic waste management, has begun operations in the county. Allegany County operates a site for yard trimmings and mulch, and the Master Gardener program offers free composting bin workshops. Business-to-farm relationships have also emerged, with Basecamp Coffee partnering with Leaning Pine Farm for composting and Clatter Coffee offering spent coffee grounds free to community gardeners.

Despite these promising initiatives, systematic countywide infrastructure does not exist. Farmers express concerns about rodent and pest problems from farm-based composting, creating resistance to accepting food scraps even when those would provide valuable soil amendments. Expansion of Frostburg State's community

composting program could provide convenient drop-off points for both residents and institutions. Connections between schools and Clean Compost could create economies of scale while addressing the educational mission of schools to model environmental stewardship. Farmer concerns about pests require educational outreach about proper composting methods and demonstration of successful systems. The alternative—sending organic matter to landfills—represents both wasted resources and missed soil-building opportunities in a county with strong agricultural heritage.

Program Coordination

The Allegany County Health Department maintains a comprehensive "Access to Food Resources Guide" that is updated twice yearly and widely distributed through the WMFC website, the ACHD website, and the Allegany County Health Planning Coalition network, the websites of the Allegany County Health Department, and distributed to the Allegany County Public School's Community School Coordinators. Additionally, AHEC-West publishes and distributes a monthly calendar featuring pantries with their hours of operation, food distributions, and free meal events.

While this provides valuable information about available food assistance programs, stakeholders identified opportunities to expand coordination infrastructure. A central hub, that is more regularly updated, to serve as a systematic information platform could help pantries avoid unknowingly competing for the same donor base, ensure residents learn about all programs for which they qualify, and help potential partners discover collaboration opportunities.

Equity and Community Engagement

Regional stakeholders identified a gap in engagement of food-insecure community members in food system planning and decision-making. There is limited participation from people experiencing food insecurity in the food council, planning meetings, and solution-seeking organizations. As one stakeholder observed, disadvantaged groups need opportunities to be involved and included in the creating and planning of programs where they are directly impacted. Current program design often reflects the perspectives of service providers rather than incorporating lived experience of those facing food insecurity.

Transportation barriers compound this engagement gap. Food access remains limited to those within walking distance who are physically able to walk and those with personal transportation. One stakeholder noted that food needs to get closer to the people who need it—delivered to them if they cannot access distribution sites. Public meetings and farmers markets become accessible only to residents with transportation, creating a two-tier system where access to coordination and fresh food depends on mobility. Economically depressed populations face barriers to participating in public meetings, even when those meetings address their needs directly.

Institutional procurement rules create additional barriers. Many institutions cannot receive local produce due to procurement regulations. K-12 schools and local colleges purchase primarily from national distributors, with contract renewal processes that farmers struggle to navigate. Institutions need advance contract review meetings before

renewals to enable farmer cohorts to compete for institutional purchasing, but such coordination mechanisms rarely exist.

The absence of food systems expertise in county planning departments limits capacity to address these structural issues through policy changes.

Emerging Opportunities and Strategic Recommendations



Photo: Allegany Farmers Market at Frostburg City Place Photo by Andy Valentine

Building on Success: Near-Term Actions (3-6 months)

Two initiatives show promise for implementation within 3-6 months. First, expanding the cold storage grant program to three additional pantries would build directly on demonstrated success while addressing the most cited infrastructure gap. Prioritizing St. John's Lutheran, Tri-Town Pantry, and Interfaith Community Pantry would strategically position resources where they can enable new partnerships and expand fresh food distribution. The Flintstone experience demonstrates that these grants do more than provide equipment—they signal institutional commitment that can catalyze additional community investment.

Second, launching a formal gleaning program would systematize farmer-pantry connections that currently depend on individual relationships. Creating a matching system that connects farmers with surplus to pantries with capacity, establishing harvest notification systems, and developing liability protection for participating farmers would transform informal occasional donations into a reliable fresh food channel. This addresses both food waste on farms and fresh food scarcity at pantries—a clear win-win that requires primarily coordination rather than significant capital investment. Partnership opportunity with the Delmarva office of the Society of St. Andrew End Hunger campaign would allow organized volunteers to glean surplus food from farmers, farmers markets, and other food providers to reduce food waste. In exchange, End

Hunger would manage donations and be able to issue MD Gleaning Tax credit letters to all participating donors.

Additionally, the national USDA Gleaning in SNAP-Ed program offers a USDA Gleaning Toolkit providing a step-by-step guide to establish a new gleaning program. With sequential recommendations detailing volunteer recruitment, engaging donors, collecting data, and learning resources from the Society of St. Andrews, Feeding America, Ample Harvest, and others, launching a sustainable, local gleaning program is a very achievable short-term opportunity.

Medium-Term Systems Development (6-12 months)

Over 6-12 months, four complementary initiatives could strengthen food system infrastructure. Supporting the South Penn-St. John’s Lutheran farm-to-institution pilot scheduled for Fall 2026 with technical assistance would help ensure success of this demonstration project, which could then expand to other schools, hospitals, correctional facilities, and the Housing and Rural Development Corporation. Maryland's local purchasing subsidy for schools provides financial incentives, but institutions need support navigating procurement procedures and developing farmer relationships. The South Cumberland clergy coalition forming represents exactly the kind of community-driven partnership that external support can help sustain and scale.

Include food systems expertise in county planning departments to address structural issues through policy changes.

Developing mobile pantry routes or food delivery partnerships would address transportation barriers for residents who cannot reach fixed-site pantries and farmers markets. This might involve coordination with Allegany County Transit, partnerships with volunteer driver networks already operating through programs like Christ Lutheran's Reach Meal, or establishment of new routes specifically designed for food access. The little red wagons distributed by St. John’s Lutheran show creative problem-solving, but mobile pantries would address the root transportation issue rather than requiring residents to self-transport heavy loads.

Establishing a local food aggregation hub would consolidate purchasing power for institutions while simplifying logistics for farmers currently navigating multiple small-scale buyer relationships. This could coordinate procurement for schools, hospitals, correctional facilities, pantries, and other institutions, creating sufficient volume to justify farmer participation while maintaining local economic benefits. Such a hub could also provide the physical infrastructure for the cold storage, washing, and light processing that would make farm products more accessible to institutional buyers.

Long-Term Structural Changes (1-2 years)

Several initiatives require 1-2 years for planning and implementation but would address root causes rather than symptoms. Advocacy for expanded public transportation to farmers markets and food sites would create sustainable access for transportation-limited residents, connecting with broader county planning discussions about mobility and economic development. This represents a policy change requiring multi-agency coordination and sustained funding, but the transportation barrier appears so

consistently across surveys and focus group discussions that it merits elevation to strategic priority rather than accepting it as unchangeable context.

The UPMC Community Garden waitlist demonstrates unmet demand for growing space, suggesting support for community garden expansion would find ready participants. New gardens could target neighborhoods with limited yard space and high food insecurity rates, potentially partnering with schools to create educational programming around the growing spaces. The Barton Church Community Garden, created with Food Council facilitation, provides a model for how external support can help communities establish new gardens.

Developing an emergency food stockpiling system distributed across multiple pantries would enhance disaster preparedness and create surge capacity for unexpected increases in demand. The Salvation Army's designated disaster response network provides a foundation, but systematic stockpiling would require coordination, storage infrastructure, and inventory management. Given increasing climate instability and economic volatility, building resilience into the food security system represents prudent planning rather than optional enhancement.

Creating local food processing capacity would extend the benefits of seasonal growing across the year, allowing preservation of surplus during peak harvest for distribution during winter months. This might include community canning facilities, commercial kitchen access for value-added products, or freezing capacity at the aggregation hub. Such infrastructure would support both food security goals and economic development by creating opportunities for small-scale food entrepreneurs.

Data Sources and Survey Respondents

This assessment draws on 93 distinct data sources including organizational surveys, individual CARAT surveys, focus groups, and school inventories.

Food Pantry Surveys (12)

United Methodist Church Flintstone, United Methodist Church LaVale, Christ Lutheran Church Reach Meal LaVale, Salvation Army Cumberland, Tri-Town Pantry, St. John’s Lutheran Church South Cumberland, Frostburg State University Food Pantry, Interfaith Community Pantry Cumberland, Our Lady of the Mountains St. Anthony Place, Frostburg United Methodist Church, AHEC WEST Hope Station, Emergency Management City Cumberland.

Community Gardens (4)

Christ Lutheran Church Community Garden LaVale, Barton Church Community Garden, Vine Avenue Community Garden (NAACP Cumberland), UPMC Community Garden.

School Garden and Food Program Inventory (17 schools)

Beall Elementary, Bel Air Elementary, Cash Valley Elementary, Cresaptown Elementary, Flintstone Elementary, Fort Hill High School, Frost Elementary, Frostburg Elementary, George's Creek Elementary, John Humbird Elementary, Mount Savage

Elementary, Northeast Elementary, South Penn Elementary, Washington Middle School, Westmar Middle School, Westernport Elementary, Westside Elementary.

Allegany County Farm Surveys (4)

Fish Holler Farm, Greise's Farm, Palmyra Farm, Turkey Foot Farm LLC.

CARAT Survey Respondents and Interviews (25)

Theresa Stahl (Allegany County Health Department), Joni Brode (UPMC Western Maryland), Tabitha Barbarito (PASA - Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture), Sarah Llewellyn (UMD Extension Master Gardener), Susan Stewart (retired Executive Director of AHEC-West), Corey Edmonds (Mountain Medical Center), Heather Greise (Allegany College of Maryland / ACM Pantry), Jessica Mellon (UME 4-H), Harold Taylor (Wholesome Harvest Food Cooperative), Alison Peters (Community Cafe Board Member), Amy Moyer (Western MD Food Bank), Clint Rawlings (America's Hauling for Hope), Dee Lockard (Second Baptist Church Pantry), Dione Lynn Clark-Trub (Allegany College of Maryland Pantry), Allegany County Office of Emergency Management, Janice Keen (Evergreen Heritage Foundation), Caralee Silka (HRDC), Lisa Beardsley, (Allegany County Health Department, Non-Emergency Medical Transportation), Kim Truly (Dept of Social Services), Robin Fazenbaker (YMCA Cumberland Housing), Cheri Gannon (His Table), Tranell Clanton (Community Cafe), Stacy Funkhouser (Local Management Board), Stacey Blank (UPMC Western Maryland), Michele Walker (United Way Potomac Highlands).

Grocery and Convenience Stores (30)

Caporale's Bakery, Ellie's Deli, B&B Meats, Stafford's Grocery and Greenhouse, Martin's (Cumberland and LaVale), Dollar Tree (Virginia Ave, LaVale, Oldtown, and Frostburg), 7-11 (Maryland Ave and Frostburg), Circle K (McMullen Hwy and Oldtown), Ollie's LaVale, PitNGo (Frederick St and McMullen Hwy), Save A Lot (Industrial Blvd, Queen City, and Frostburg), Weis Frostburg, Walmart LaVale, Love's Cumberland, and Sheetz (store #41, #46, #51, #59, #62, #129, and #167).

Focus Groups (1)

March 2026 Nutrition Focus Group Participants: Theresa Stahl (WMFC, ACHD), Andy Valentine (WMFC, family farm), Allison Lutz (UPMC Western MD Lead Outpatient Dietitian), Dr. Shiv Khanna (Primary Care Provider and Healthy Meal Program), Tricia Evix (WIC Manager), Cassie Hershberger (HRDC senior congregate meals and home-delivered meals), Lindsay Ridenour (WMFC, WCHD program coordinator), Melissa Bolyard (WMFC, Garrett County Economic Development Agriculture)

Conclusion: Assets-Based Development with Strategic Investment

Allegany County's food security assessment reveals a community that has built extraordinary assets, while facing infrastructure and coordination challenges common to rural areas. The Western Maryland Food Council Allegany County Workgroup provides

opportunities for quarterly communication, which leads to collaborations that improve food security within the county. Allegany County Public School's commitment to school gardens, with accompanying food pantries, and nutrition programming demonstrates both commitment and capacity to expand. The WMFC cold storage grants have already shown their multiplier effect through catalyzed local donations and expanded fresh food distribution, validating the theory that strategic infrastructure investment yields returns beyond the direct grant value.

The path forward involves building on these demonstrated strengths while strategically addressing the gaps that limit impact. Expanding successful models like cold storage grants and garden-pantry partnerships, formalizing informal relationships into sustainable systems, and investing in coordination infrastructure would leverage existing community assets while filling critical gaps.

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