

**COUNTY OF MILWAUKEE**  
INTEROFFICE COMMUNICATION

**DATE:** February 20, 2026

**TO:** Marcelia Nicholson, Chairwoman, County Board of Supervisors

**FROM:** Shakita LaGrant-McClain, Executive Director, DHHS  
Sumaiyah Clark, Chief Equity Officer, Office of Equity  
Celia Benton, Director, Economic Development

**SUBJECT:** A report from the Executive Director, Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), the Chief Equity Officer, Office of Equity, and the Director, Economic Development, providing recommendations for addressing food insecurity and apartheid in Milwaukee County

**File Type:** Informational Report

---

**REQUEST**

File 25-705 directs DHHS and the Office of Equity to 1) incorporate measures of food apartheid and related disparities into the County's racial equity budget tool 2) collaborate with state, municipal and community partners to identify strategies and potential interventions to address food apartheid in Milwaukee County, starting with Metcalfe Park and 3) recommend actions and policy options for addressing food apartheid in Milwaukee County.

During its review, DHHS identified several grassroots efforts currently underway, but systemwide engagement—bringing together community organizations, public-sector partners, economic development groups, the Farmers' Market Coalition, the Wisconsin Grocers Association, the Greater Milwaukee Food Pantry Coalition, and local foundations—is essential to achieving a lasting impact.

**Background**

Food insecurity occurs when a household cannot reliably get enough affordable, nutritious food because of low income, high costs, poor services (like healthcare or transportation), or other resource limitations. Food apartheid is the result of racist systems and policies (such as redlining and long-term economic disinvestment) which cause neighborhoods to be denied fair access to healthy, affordable food.

The federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), also known as FoodShare in Wisconsin, helps ensure people can access healthy, nutritious food, but when nearby grocery stores close, communities can face reduced access to fresh options

and greater barriers to food security. In 2025, an average of over 233,000<sup>1</sup> people relied on FoodShare across Wisconsin to buy groceries. Benefits were accessed via an Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) card (Quest card) for grocery stores and farmers' markets. Wisconsin counties operate FoodShare, but in Milwaukee County the program is administered by the State of Wisconsin as part of its Milwaukee Enrollment Services Unit. While Milwaukee County DHHS doesn't have direct oversight of this program, we recognize that access to healthy food is essential for the well-being of our participants.

One of the most pressing concerns for FoodShare is the impact of the budget reconciliation act (the 'One Big Beautiful Bill Act') passed last summer. Changes to eligibility requirements and an estimated 20%<sup>2</sup> reduction – the most significant in history – are expected to result in fewer people receiving benefits. It is anticipated that this will only exacerbate the current state of food insecurity.

### **SNAP – Loss of Education Outreach Money**

It's also worth noting that the federal budget eliminated the SNAP-ed program as of December 31, 2025. In Milwaukee County, these funds were directed to the Hunger Task Force and FoodWise (UW-Extension). This 30-year-old program provided funds to educate people about healthy eating, physical activity, and shopping on a budget. This directly impacts the community's ability to address food insecurity and coordinate resources.

### **Grocery Store Closures**

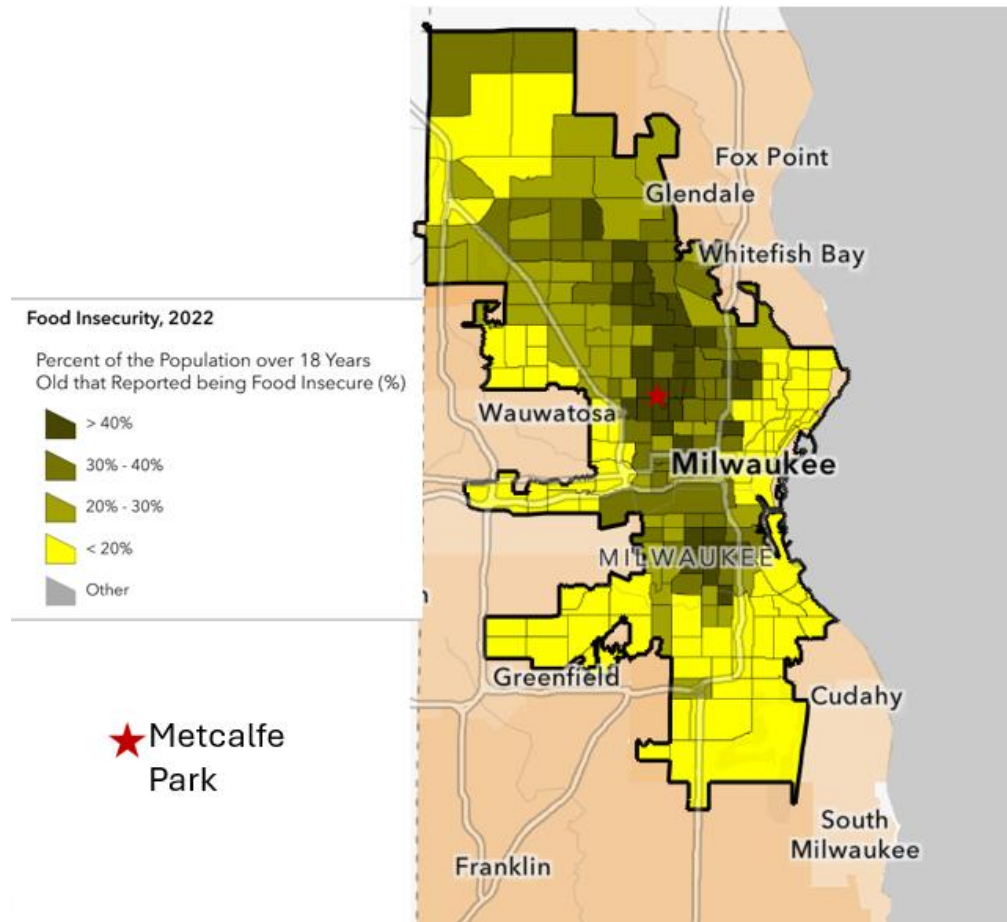
Over the past year, several area grocery stores abruptly closed many of which were in higher poverty neighborhoods in Milwaukee County (see Attachment 1-Summary Table of Grocery Store Closures (2023-Present)). The map below shows reported food insecurity across Milwaukee County partly caused by grocery store closures with higher concentrations on the northwest side.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/foodshare/rsdata.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, "Proposed Farm Bill Ignores Unfolding Food Assistance Crisis," February 13, 2026. <https://www.cbpp.org/press/statements/proposed-farm-bill-ignores-unfolding-food-assistance-crisis>

<sup>3</sup> Data You Can Use. [Interactive Maps - Data You Can Use](#)



While closures have been an issue over the past few years, several recent back-to-back closures drew community wide concern and prompted policymakers and stakeholders to seek solutions. As part of this effort, DHHS has connected with numerous agencies and community partners to solicit feedback on potential solutions.

**Feedback from Community Organizations**

Over the last few months, DHHS and Office of Equity met with a host of system leaders and community partners (see Attachment 2) to gather feedback to inform this report. The goals of the meetings included:

- Learning more about the issue of food apartheid, contributing factors and policies.
- Understanding what is currently being done to address food insecurity; and
- Identifying recommendations

DHHS found that there already are a number of initiatives occurring in the community as well as community members who are committed to identifying solutions. Given this

existing work, it's important to consider strategies that are community-led and engage and empower residents.

### **Community Efforts to Address Food Insecurity**

The following is a summary of just some of the efforts underway currently to address food insecurity in Milwaukee County:

**Sherman Park Grocery Store** – The store, located at 4315 W. Fond du Lac Ave in Milwaukee, opened in 2022 as an independently owned, for-profit business and serves as Milwaukee's only full-service Black-owned grocery store. The store offers a soul food deli and has a number of partners including Parklawn Assembly of God, P.R.I.S.M. Economic Corporation, UpStart Kitchen, Clean Laundry, Sunshine Dance Studio, and Community IMPACT Center.

It is estimated that an average of 46%<sup>4</sup> of residents across the 10 census tracts that make up Sherman Park rely on SNAP benefits for food access, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. The grocery store is focused on providing fresh food and teaching the community how to cook healthy and delicious meals. Unfortunately, the store has also struggled financially to support the community need.

**Hunger Task Force Mobile Market** - The Mobile Market is an active grocery store – not a food pantry or donation site. Grocery items are from Piggly Wiggly and are priced 25% below store prices. The mobile market operates Monday to Friday with two stops – one in the morning and one in the afternoon. Stops include senior centers and Meinecke Plaza (the site of the former Pick n Save in Metcalfe Park). Utilization has been lower than expected at Meinecke Plaza, and Hunger Task Force is working with the community to identify strategies to increase participation.

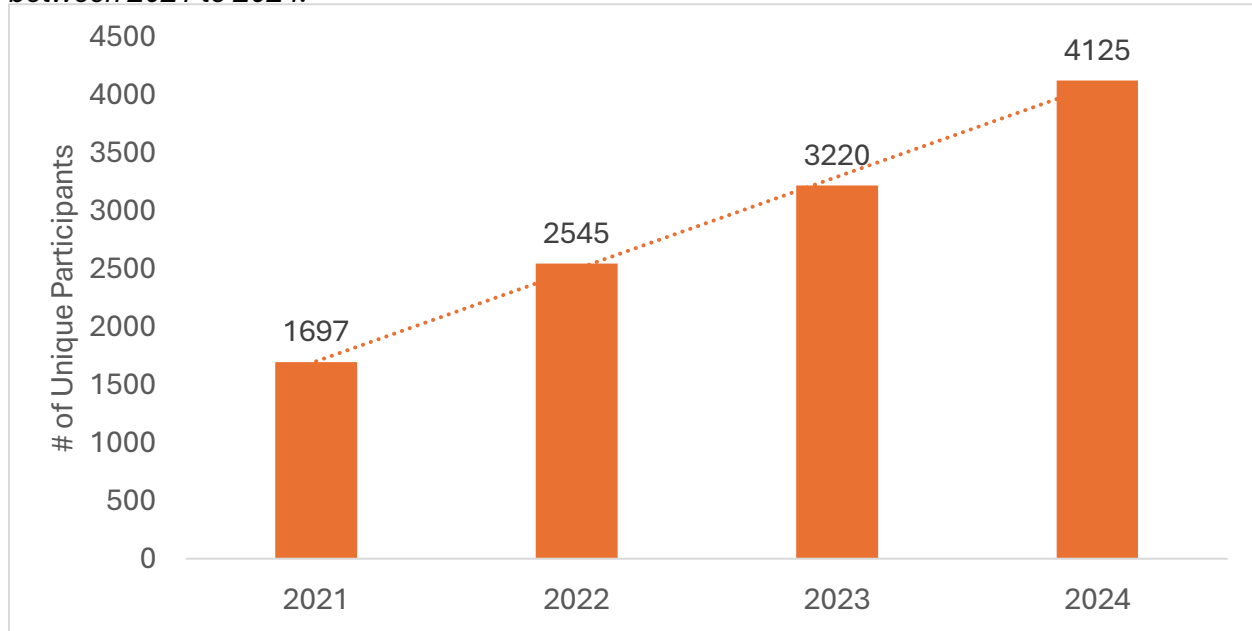
**Milwaukee (MKE) Market Match** – MKE Match helps individuals and families access healthy local foods that are fresh and affordable by matching their FoodShare benefits. Eligible purchases include fresh vegetables and herbs with the addition of meats, eggs, dairy products, and honey.

Over the last few years, Milwaukee County invested significantly in fresh food access and healthy food choices by directing just under \$1 million in American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding to this program. In addition, the 2026 DHHS Adopted Budget includes \$150,000 to continue the program. In terms of utilization, there was a 143% increase in MKE Market Match participants from 2021 to 2024. In addition, between 2021 to 2024, 22% of the participants returned to the farmer's market for more than one year to utilize MKE Market Match.

---

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Census Bureau's 2019-2023 American Community Survey five-year estimates.

Figure 1. Total number of unique customers who participated in Milwaukee Market Match between 2021 to 2024.<sup>5</sup>



Metcalfe Park Community Bridges (MPCB) – MPCB is a resident-led community organization in Milwaukee’s Metcalfe Park neighborhood which focuses on several critical issues such as housing, youth and family programming with food access becoming more urgent as a result of the closure of the Pick n Save on 35<sup>th</sup> Street. DAS–Economic Development recently presented an MPCB application to the Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors seeking a \$250,000 Community Development Investment Grant (CDIG) from the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation (WEDC) under File 26-191. The board unanimously approved this resolution in support of this project and if finalized by WEDC, funding will be used for Metcalfe Park’s Liberation Hub project which includes adding a food pantry and commercial kitchen as part of a larger community and social hub project.

The Milwaukee Fresh Food Access Report, prepared by the City of Milwaukee's Department of City Development in April 2019, addresses the critical issue of "food deserts" within the city, where residents, particularly in low-income neighborhoods, have limited access to affordable, fresh, and healthy foods. The report originated from a Common Council resolution calling for a Fresh Food Access Strategy to ensure equitable access to healthy food options across Milwaukee. The report outlines a series of strategies such as attracting grocery stores to underserved areas through policy changes and financial incentives, developing alternative retail outlets like food hubs and mobile markets, increasing fresh food availability in corner stores, improving transportation

<sup>5</sup> Fondy Food Center reporting to Milwaukee County DHHS on Milwaukee Market Match, March 10, 2025.

options to food sources, and promoting health education. The City also operated a Fresh Food Access Fund grant program in 2023 and 2024 though it is no longer soliciting new applications. A resolution ([251707](#)) is currently pending to create strategies for the retention and attraction of full-service grocery stores and pharmacies.

### **Initiatives in Other Communities**

#### **The Food Trust**

The Food Trust focuses on food access, affordability and education to address food insecurity across the country. Originating in Philadelphia in 1992, The Food Trust provides technical assistance and a host of resources to communities in addressing food insecurity. One of the resources is the [Health Food Financing Handbook: From Advocacy to Implementation](#): (prepared in 2013 and funded by Robert Wood Johnson Foundation) addresses the challenges faced by underserved communities across the United States in accessing healthy and affordable groceries. The handbook argues that establishing supermarkets and other healthy food not only improves public health outcomes by providing nutritious options but also stimulates local economies through job creation, investment, and other business development.

The handbook provides a roadmap to address food insecurity in communities starting from advocacy to implementation of solutions. The report highlights Pennsylvania's Healthy Food Financing Initiative (HFFI) as a successful model which offers one-time grants, loans, and technical assistance to develop, renovate, or expand food retail projects.

#### **Detroit Food Policy Council**

Another successful effort addressing food insecurity is the [Detroit Food Policy Council](#) which was established in 2009. This organization offers numerous reports and toolkits on the city's food system focusing on production, distribution, consumption, waste generation and composting, nutrition and food assistance program participation and innovative food system programs. The Council also established a Grocery Store Coalition which works to increase capacity of Detroit grocers and provide equitable access to healthy food.

**Racial Equity Budgeting Tool (REBT) Measure to Include Food Apartheid:**

File 25-705 also requests that Office of Equity incorporate measures of food apartheid and related disparities into the County’s Racial Equity Budget Tool (REBT). The REBT is being revised to reflect the following:

Recommendation	Description
Revise question number ten (10), glossary, and technical assistance processes for the REBT	The modified question will include efforts that all departments are making to address multilingual language access, accessibility barriers, food apartheid, financial empowerment and/or other factors that impact the stability and wellbeing of people in Milwaukee County.

The REBT enables departments to critically assess the impacts of budget decisions. The tool is structured around Milwaukee County’s strategic focus areas to help departments and decision makers be better stewards of public resources. Racial equity budgeting is not about increasing spending on racial equity programs explicitly. Instead, it is about the quality of spending and analyzing fiscal policies and budgetary decisions to understand their impact.

Racism has been and is a public health crisis in Milwaukee County. According to the County Health Rankings, Milwaukee County is, and has consistently been, one of the lowest-ranked counties for health in Wisconsin and, according to Federal Reserve Economic Data, Milwaukee County is one of our nation’s most racially segregated areas.

Racism (not race) is a leading indicator of health because it structures access to opportunity — housing, education, employment, food, safety, and care. When access to opportunity is structured unequally, health outcomes follow that pattern. Other forms of oppression (i.e., ableism, sexism, etc.) operate through similar pathways, and when they intersect with racism, the impact on health compounds.

When we examine and correct the structural barriers created by racism — such as inequitable housing policy, underinvestment in neighborhoods, food apartheid, or unequal access to capital — we are also strengthening the infrastructure that also affects women, people with disabilities, older adults, Veterans, immigrants, and others who face systemic barriers in Milwaukee County.

In response to the resolution, it is most appropriate to adapt question number ten. The modified question will include efforts that all departments are making to address

multilingual language access, food apartheid, financial empowerment and/or other factors that impact the stability and wellbeing of people in Milwaukee County.

*Original question: What is your department doing to dismantle barriers to diverse and inclusive communities, including meeting multilingual needs and other communication or accessibility barriers?*

*Updated question: What is your department doing to dismantle barriers to diverse and inclusive communities, including meeting multilingual needs, accessibility barriers, food apartheid, financial empowerment or other factors that impact the stability and wellbeing of people in Milwaukee County?*

Additionally, Office of Equity will update the glossary of terms included in the REBT, offer an informational session, and host open office hours during the 2027 budget cycle. These technical assistance efforts to Milwaukee County employees responsible for completing their department's REBT.

**Recommended Strategies for Food Access and Apartheid**

The following are recommendations based on discussions with numerous community agencies and other best practices as described throughout this report. DHHS, Office of Equity and DAS-Economic Development are proposing that these recommendations be considered as part of a community-led effort.

Recommendation	Description
Establishment of a community-led effort to address food access	This group would include community partners already working on food access, DHHS, the Office of Equity, Economic Development, coalitions, associations, foundations, and other local and municipal stakeholders to align efforts, share data, and produce a workplan to end food apartheid. It's important that this effort be led by community members to ensure grass roots engagement.
Review Hunger Task Force Mobile Market stops	Analyze utilization by mobile market location schedule, redesign schedule in response to community input/outreach with the goal of increasing users.
Community-Managed Power Fridges (free source of food with 24/7 access)	Explore the use of community fridges stocked with surplus food (that would otherwise be thrown away) as an option for high-need locations.
Pursue foundation/state/federal grants	Grant development (e.g., SBP, WEDC) to sustainably fund Market Match, potentially expand HTF mobile market, and support new initiatives.
Healthy Food Financing Initiative (HFFI)	Work with City to explore re-establishing Fresh Food Access fund and pursue public-private seed funding.
Healthy Corner Store Initiative	Support corner stores to stock fresh produce through incentives and technical assistance.
Support urban agriculture and farm connections	Expand urban farming and distribution to local markets and institutions.
Building Bridge Small Business	Grow food-related entrepreneurship within impacted communities and seek ways to add food access with existing businesses.
Zoning & grocery closure notification	Advocate (via Intergovernmental Cooperation Council-ICC) for standardized ordinances across municipalities within Milwaukee County to regulate grocery closure notification process and outreach.

**FISCAL EFFECT**

This report is informational and there is no fiscal effect.

**VIRTUAL MEETING INVITES**

**PREPARED BY:**

Clare O'Brien, DHHS Budget and Policy Director

**APPROVED BY:**

*Shakita LaGrant-McClain*  
\_\_\_\_\_

Shakita LaGrant-McClain, Executive Director, DHHS

*Sumaiyah Clark*  
\_\_\_\_\_

Sumaiyah Clark, Chief Equity Officer, Office of Equity

*Celia Benton*  
\_\_\_\_\_

Celia Benton, Director of Economic Development, DAS

**ATTACHMENTS:**

- 1 – Summary of Grocery Store Closures – 2023-Present
- 2 – Agencies Contacted

cc: County Executive David Crowley  
Sup. Willie Johnson, Jr., Chair, Finance Committee  
Mary Jo Meyers, Chief of Staff, County Executive's Office  
Kelly Bablitch, Chief of Staff, Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors  
Janelle M. Jensen, Director of Legislative Services, Office of the County Clerk  
Steve Cady, Research and Policy Director, Comptroller's Office  
Maddie Fruehe, Budget and Management Analyst, SBP