

Feeding the Future in Rural Arizona

If you ask Irene Coronado what her title is, she'll give you a different answer on different days.

"I'm basically the director/manager/cook ... I do a little bit of everything here. **Wherever they need me, I'm there.**"

She's been part of the team at Arlington Elementary School District for eight years – one of just two employees who keep the nutrition program running to feed about 250 kids each school day. The Arlington area is about two hours west of central Phoenix; it's home to swaths of farmland, Bureau of Land Management land, and solar farms. It's a rural area in every sense with a high poverty level, so the school district has a Provision 2 designation:

All children eat for free.

"We have a lot of loving teachers ... it's like home," said Irene. "They say I should get a cot to put in my office because I'm always here. And it's really nice to be here. I love coming to work every day."

Arlington is a growing community – more homes are being built every day. The nearest grocery store is about 35 minutes away from where most people live, but some live in Harquahala Valley, which is more than an hour away from the nearest grocery store. Most of Arlington's families are employed as farmworkers, so they are often in and out of work due to seasonal changes and agricultural challenges. Summer is an especially slow time for work in the area.

"Summer meals are a blessing," said a woman who was picking up summer meals for her nieces, nephews, and grandkids, who all live in her home, "especially because of how high food costs are ... and it's convenient to pick them up so we don't have to pack up 10 or 12 kids for the store."

This is Irene's first year building Arlington's summer meal program. She was able to get not just one, but two sites up and running for part of the summer! Next year, Irene aims to start planning in January. She's eager to learn more about the program, look at the impact they made this summer, and **make next summer even stronger.**

"I wanted more participation ... we saw about 75 families on our busiest day between both sites," said Irene. "But [Community Programs Manager] David said we're doing pretty good ... I'm going to take his word for it. I tried my best."

In 2015, the Arizona Food Bank Network started the **Innovation in Childhood Nutrition Program** to tackle barriers and difficulties surrounding school meal programs and other childhood nutrition resources.



Grab-and-go meals for two days ready for distribution in Globe, AZ.



Irene and her "right hand" with the warm summer meals they prepared in Arlington, AZ.

The team chipped away at stubborn obstacles like storage, staffing, and paperwork. They've worked to empower staff not only in public-school nutrition but even at charter schools and other community institutions where kids go to learn and grow, from Globe to Arlington and beyond.

"There are many times [in my work] when staff are passionate about making changes, but they struggle with their teams being stretched so thin or there not being enough funding for programs that meals may be tied to," said David Robinson, AzFBN community programs manager overseeing the Innovation in Child Nutrition Program.

This 10-year-old program is a pillar of AzFBN's work to end hunger. It's a model of collaboration, thanks to people like Irene and David, and is bolstered by support from No Kid Hungry/Share Our Strength and the Virginia G. Piper Charitable Trust.

The Summer Food Service Program, now called SUN Meals, is a special area of focus that has seen plenty of evolution over the years since it started in 1968.

In 2023, there were 1,018 summer meal sites across Arizona. In 2024, that number grew to **1,165 sites** and over **3.4 million meals** were served through the summer meal program in Arizona — 300,000 more than in 2023. Grab-and-go options in rural areas continue to grow year over year, and people like Irene are on a mission to make sure families know about this vital resource.

"I love what I'm doing, so I wish I could do more. Thanks to this network, the more people I talk to, I'm starting to do more." Yes, Irene, and **we can't wait to see what you do next year!**

Our Members





Frankly, there are especially challenging times ahead for food banking. The need for support cannot be understated. Arizona's food banks are already serving upward of 700,000 people each month. But no matter what, **food banks will always do whatever it takes to meet the need** through collaboration, innovation, and community support. I know we can do better for our neighbors together. And yes, after 40 years of AzFBN and counting, we still believe we can end hunger in our lifetime.

APRIL BRADHAM AzFBN President & CEO



FOOD BANKING

With AzFBN's goal of going **zero-produce-waste by 2030**, there are plenty of improvements being made around the AzFBN produce warehouse in Rio Rico. There is officially no dumpster used for produce waste at the warehouse; instead, about 20 local farmers utilize the produce waste for animal feed and/or compost. Donated produce gets sorted so that the best of it goes into family-friendly produce boxes, then what's not-so-good goes straight to our composting machines or to a lift truck, to finally get delivered by AzFBN staff to a farmer within a 10 mile radius.

With this shift, AzFBN has redirected more than **2 million pounds** of produce waste to farmers instead of the landfill this fiscal year! Going zero-waste also saves about \$75,000 annually in landfill dumping fees - not to mention the environmental benefit of less produce rotting in the landfill to emit harmful gases. The AzFBN Produce Program continues to be a strong business solution for the produce industry in Arizona and Mexico, while feeding hundreds of thousands of people struggling with food insecurity in Arizona (and beyond) and reducing food waste.



461,540 produce boxes distributed to food banks across Arizona and beyond through the AzFBN Produce Program



Overall, AzFBN facilitated the distribution of **60,050,186 pounds** of food to **56 food banks in 16 states** through the Southwest Produce Co-Op, AzFBN Produce Program, and national Feeding America network



135 growers and producers across Arizona supplied food banks with **\$3,811,806** worth of nutritious, local food through the AzFBN Friends of the Farm Program

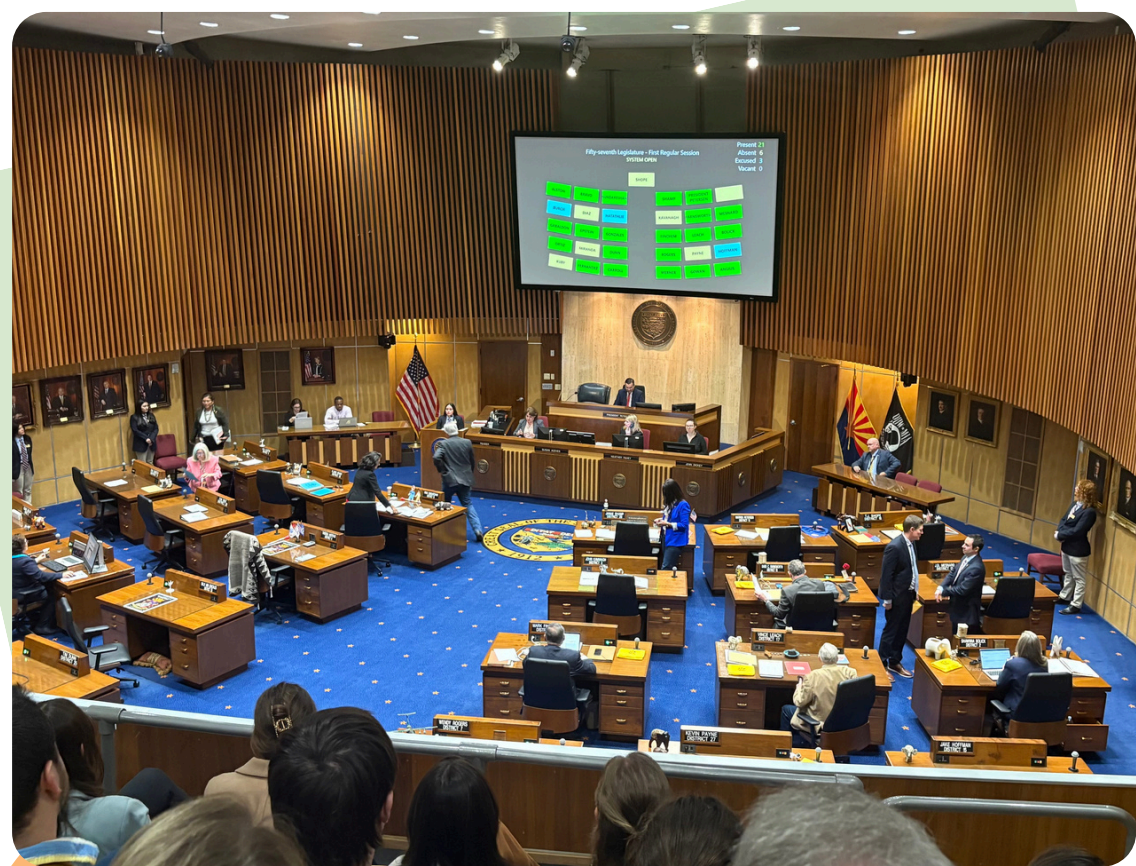


How Could a Dump Truck End Hunger?





January-June 2025 - After last year’s historic decision, Gov. Katie Hobbs and the Arizona State Legislature extended the first-time \$3.8 million investment in **school meals in the state budget**, thanks to years of effort from our Advocacy Team and their partners. With \$3.8 million invested, eligible families with students at public and charter schools operating the National School Lunch Program and the National School Breakfast Program won’t have to worry about the 70-cent copay for breakfast and lunch each day.



Hear from food bank CEOs about the **2025 federal budget bill**:



February 2025 - AzFBN organized and hosted the 2025 Anti-Hunger Day at the State Capitol! Over **100 advocates, allies, and legislators** came together to celebrate wins, establish priorities, and show what a force this community is at the Capitol’s front door. Every year, this event allows us to highlight the importance of sustainable and smart policy solutions to ending hunger in our state.

June 2025 - AzFBN partnered with four local social services organizations to advocate for changes to the federal budget bill, which cut SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) and Medicaid funding for Arizonans. Over 50 advocates and local media were in attendance, including Arizona’s Family, ABC15, Phoenix New Times, and more. AzFBN will continue supporting SNAP and food banks, which will need help to meet unprecedented need - over **700,000 people at Arizona food banks each month**, up 60% from 2024. For every meal a food bank provides, SNAP can provide nine.



In the 2024-2025 fiscal year, AzFBN reached **237 schools** to support **child nutrition programming**, including (but not limited to) providing ongoing support for a unique improvement, building connections between schools and community partners, assisting with grant applications, and more.

Additionally, AzFBN’s outreach helped expand summer meal opportunities for kids in rural communities. The team reached **73 school districts** to support grab-and-go summer

meal efforts, resulting in thousands of meals every day for families whose children rely on school meals for consistent nutrition throughout the year.

In Summer 2024, over **700,000 children in Arizona received benefits** thanks to a new federal food assistance program called SUN Bucks, which is geared toward feeding children while school is out. As a key partner in the program launch, AzFBN managed direct outreach to families on behalf of the state agencies, and kept families informed so that no eligible kids went without three square meals a day.

Back in Rio Rico, AZ, the No Limits Job Training Program celebrated its second graduation! **Twenty-one participants** earned OSHA certification and 19 earned forklift certification. Graduates also worked on building adaptability, communication and English language skills, and interviewing skills. **Three participants have since secured better-paying, permanent, full-time jobs**, including some promotions internally!



Read **The Power of a Free School Meal** on our blog:





1,067,120

Over 1M people in Arizona are food insecure



291,290

of them are children

Hunger in 2025

When you open your fridge to see empty shelves, do you go to your local grocery store?

Or do you set a reminder to make it to the next nearby food distribution bright and early to get in line?

The reality is that many Arizonans visited a food bank for the first time during the pandemic. It is very likely these families are continuing to struggle with the devastating effects of inflation and rising grocery prices.

Since the 2020 pandemic began, attendance at food banks has nearly doubled. Now, food banks in Arizona collectively see **over 700,000 people every month**.

According to Feeding America's latest Map the Meal Gap study, over 1 million Arizonans are food insecure, nearly 300,000 of them children. Food insecurity does not discriminate; many families are one medical crisis or job loss away from needing a food bank. Studies like Map the Meal Gap show that year after year, rural residents, older adults, children, those living with disabilities, and other vulnerable communities struggle with food insecurity the most.

While federal programs like SUN Meals and SUN Bucks help thousands of people through the rough summer months, recent cuts to these programs, as well as to Medicaid and to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), mean the burden on the most vulnerable in our communities is about to be even greater. The \$290 million cut to SNAP in the 2025 federal budget bill means more barriers to food assistance for parents and older adults who are already struggling to make ends meet.

Times are tough, to put it lightly. Now more than ever, it's important to listen to and watch out for your neighbors. AzFBN recently held listening sessions with community members experiencing food insecurity to better understand the types of struggles our neighbors are up against.

The diverse group of 38 Arizonans met over the spring of 2025 to discuss barriers to access, language and cultural barriers to food resources, and the complicated stigma of reaching out for help. These powerful perspectives provide a foundation for the Lived Experience Council, which will help empower people to use their voice and help AzFBN and other advocates inform lawmakers about the *true* impact of hunger.

Average Monthly Food Bank Clients

700,000 2025

450,000 2024



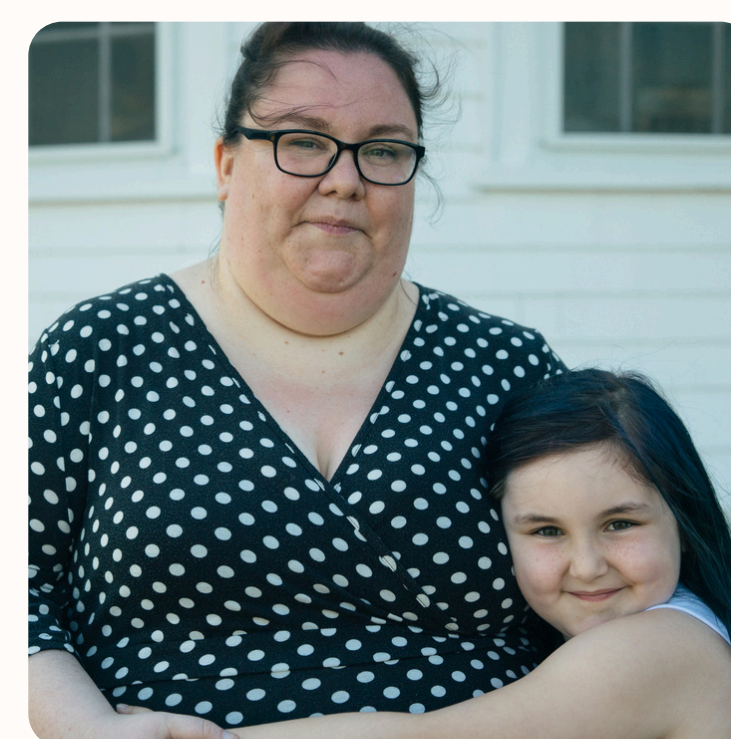
The Emotional Experience of Food Insecurity

"My mom was **really scared** to take any of that government help because she thought she would never be able to become a [U.S.] citizen."



"Food assistance is really **make or break** for people's lives."

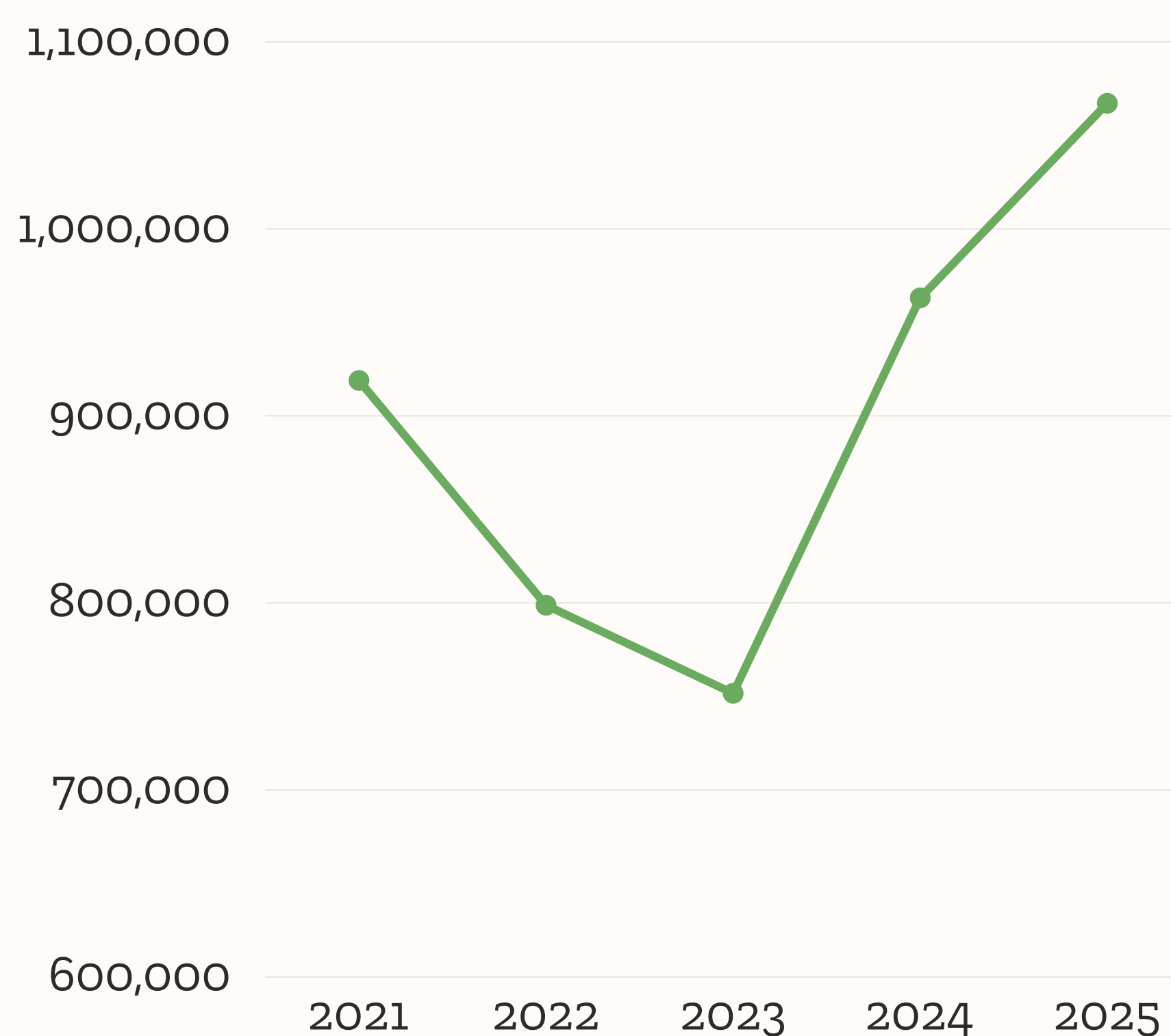
"It's very rewarding seeing **how happy** [the kids] get when they see their food."



"[In] becoming a young single mom [and then] diving into state assistance, SNAP, and all those resources, **I remember feeling embarrassed in applying.**"



Food Insecure People in Arizona



Source: Feeding America, Map the Meal Gap

"I've never had or grown up with SNAP or any kind of federal assistance, just because it is a way to [draw] eyes on you that you do not want. I would rarely see my father. **My father worked two to four jobs at times, so that we always had food.**"

— AzFBN listening session participant



2025 summer/fall newsletter