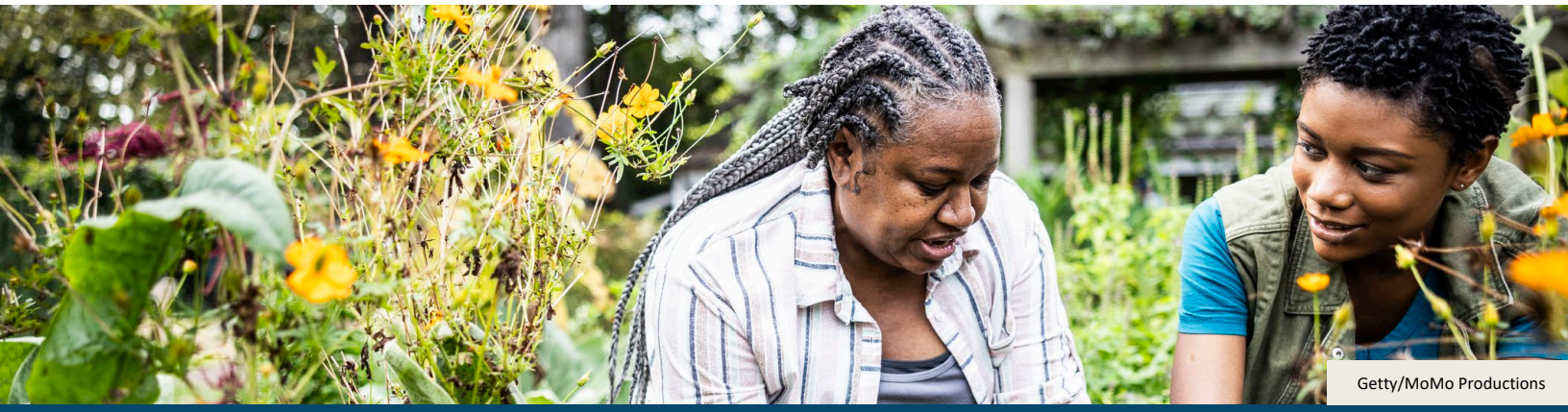
CLASP
The Center for Law and Social Policy



Getty/MoMo Productions

FOOD SOVEREIGNTY: WHY FOOD ASSISTANCE CAN'T STOP AT JUST SNAP AND WIC

PARKER GILKESSON DAVIS AND TEON HAYES | FEBRUARY 2026

WHEN SYSTEMS FAIL, COMMUNITIES FEED THEMSELVES

For years, much of the anti-hunger space has focused on protecting and strengthening the country's two main federal nutrition programs, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). SNAP helps put food on the table for more than 40 million people, and WIC supports pregnant people, babies, and young children at some of the most critical points in their lives. These essential programs save lives.

But they are no longer enough on their own.

Ensuring that everyone is fed feels both urgent and winnable. But achieving this goal will happen only if we broaden how we think about food assistance. While federal programs like SNAP and WIC must remain strong, they cannot be the only answer. Communities have always stepped in when systems fall short. The work now is to recognize that, while also both investing in and treating community-based food systems as essential, not temporary.

2025 made that reality impossible to ignore. Between the passage of H.R. 1 and a federal government shutdown that briefly paused SNAP benefits, families were reminded just how

fragile our food assistance systems have become. As the federal landscape continues to be unpredictable, our work must expand and be bolder. As advocates, policymakers, philanthropists, and overall humans, our mission can't just be about preserving public benefits; it must be about ensuring people are fed, period! No matter who is in office; how local, state, or federal budgets shift; or how unstable federal investment becomes, everyone living in this country must have access to nutritious, affordable food.

For the first time in modern history, SNAP came dangerously close to not being fully administered because of the 2025 government shutdown. Even though the government reopened, the message was clear: Programs that millions of families rely on can be disrupted quickly, without a comprehensive national system that can fill the gaps. This leaves the burden on communities to rely on one another. When food assistance becomes a political bargaining chip, families are the ones who pay the price. This recent political failure was truly a warning, and we need to take heed.

For those of us who have worked in public benefits policy for years, this shift didn't come out of nowhere. We could see it in the language being used, the proposals coming out of Congress, and the growing comfort with cutting programs that help people survive. Communities have to prepare now by building the relationships, local infrastructure, and shared responsibility needed to make sure people can eat, regardless of federal action or instability.

And that work is already happening.

Across the country, communities are feeding themselves in the ways they always have: Through community gardens, mutual aid networks, food co-ops, and local grocery models. These efforts go beyond feel-good programs to address gaps in nutrition and care to support families when benefits run out, eligibility changes, or systems fail entirely.

CLASP's role in this moment is to be a bridge of shared power connecting community and policymaking. That means sharing policy information with communities, uplifting what's working at the local and state level, and connecting grassroots leaders to funding, state and national partners, and decision-makers. When we center people who are closest to poverty—especially communities of color and people who navigate multiple systems at once—we see solutions that are practical, immediate, and rooted in real life.

Food is a human right. And whether through federal programs, local initiatives, or both, our collective responsibility is the same: to make sure everyone eats.

FOOD SOVEREIGNTY IS SURVIVAL

Food sovereignty means more than access—it means power. Many members of Indigenous, Black, and immigrant communities were never supported by formal or well-resourced government or corporate food systems. Through colonization, segregation, land theft, and disinvestment, those systems were disrupted, denied, or never built at all. But at the community level, survival still happened. People grew food when they could, bartered what they had, shared meals, extended credit at mom-and-pop stores, and fed one another. The same collective skills that grandmothers described from their early childhoods during the Great Depression are the ones communities have relied on through every period of economic and political turmoil: when systems failed, people came together to feed each other.

The problem is not that communities forgot how to feed themselves, but that policy has made it harder to do so. Large amounts of land have been taken from Black farmers and Tribal Nations, and new restrictions have been placed on where and how people can grow food, including rules in many **public housing complexes** and **local zoning codes** that prohibit gardens, raised beds, or food cultivation. Combined with the commodification and industrialization of our food system, these policies have limited communities' ability to grow and access food in the ways our ancestors did.

Food sovereignty in 2026 and beyond is about communities taking back control of how and where they get their food, ensuring that food systems are built by and for the people who use them. We've already seen what this can look like in practice. Indigenous chefs, scholars, and culture-bearers like **Sean Sherman, Michael W. Twitty**, and **Anela Malik** have been leading powerful efforts to reclaim food traditions that were disrupted by colonization, enslavement, and displacement. Their work reminds us that food sovereignty is not a new idea. It's a return to ancestral knowledge, cultural memory, and foodways rooted in care, land, and community rather than extraction and profit.

Because the truth is, we already have the tools and the wisdom within our communities to care for one another. What's missing is investment, connection, and sustained support. Communities will always rise to meet the need because they have no choice. But they should not have to do it alone.

Philanthropy, corporations, advocates, and policymakers must intentionally invest in the community-based food systems that are filling the gaps where federal programs like SNAP

and WIC fall short. That means researching what's already working on the ground, holding space to strengthen and protect public benefits, and helping scale local efforts so they are durable, not temporary.

PARKER'S PERSPECTIVE: IF IT PLAYS IN PEORIA

One of the clearest examples of community support and food sovereignty in action is happening in Parker's own hometown of Peoria, Illinois, a place that has always reflected the pulse of the nation.

There's a saying that's followed the city for generations: "**If it plays in Peoria.**" The idea is simple—if something works in Peoria, it can work anywhere. And right now, this city, so long described as a testing ground for the country's policies, culture, and economy, is showing what happens when systems fail and communities respond.

Grocery stores once thrived in Peoria, especially in the South End (also known as the South Side), where Black families built vibrant communities before policy decisions, market withdrawal, and racialized disinvestment systematically stripped the area of resources. These conditions often precede gentrification. Now the South End is considered a **food desert.** Families spend more money on gas just to reach stores miles away, rely on corner stores with limited options, or go without fresh food altogether. Access to food has become a daily stressor, not because neighborhood residents don't want to eat well, but because the infrastructure to do so has been stripped away.

What's important to name is that the grocery stores didn't leave Peoria evenly: they abruptly left the South End. Over time, every major grocery store closed or relocated. While this kind of disinvestment is often framed as unfortunate or accidental, it follows a pattern that many of us recognize—especially those who have lived in larger cities and watched gentrification unfold in real time.

The cycle is familiar: disinvest in a neighborhood and allow conditions to deteriorate and property values to fall. Families are left with fewer options and fewer reasons to stay. Eventually, people move—sometimes by choice, often out of necessity. Then, once land is cheap and the community has been thinned out, investment returns, but with a new population in mind: white people.

Parker remembers being in the eighth grade and completing a school project on the "revitalization" of Peoria that consisted of plans for different areas downtown, in the South End, and on Main Street. Today, Main Street is fully revitalized. The warehouse district downtown has followed. And slowly but surely, that same wave is moving south through the city. However, many of the families who built and sustained these neighborhoods are no longer there to benefit from what's coming.

This is how gentrification works when it's dressed up as revitalization. The investment is real, but it comes after communities of color have been pushed out, worn down, or made invisible. Homes that held generations of family history are sold. People relocate to other parts of town or leave Peoria altogether, not because they want to, but because living without access to food, jobs, and basic services becomes unbearable.

Yet even in the midst of this, people in the South End continue to care for one another. Community centers, churches, neighbors, and families are filling gaps and showing us what real community looks like when people refuse to let one another go hungry.

At Peoria's **George Washington Carver Community Center** staff and community members have come together in powerful ways to bridge the growing gap in food access. Through a partnership with **The Fresh Mobile Market,** Carver brings fresh produce, meats, and pantry staples directly to the community each month. Families can shop right inside the center, often at lower prices than nearby stores. The center currently accepts cash or card, but is working on eventually taking LINK, Illinois' SNAP benefits card.

One mother told Jacobie Proctor, CEO of Carver, "This is the first time I've been able to buy fresh produce without having to choose between food and gas." That moment stays with Jacobie. "It's not just groceries," she said. "It's relief, hope, and a reminder that someone sees their struggle and cares enough to help."

As Jacobie shared during our conversation, the idea for the mobile market came from listening to families:

> We kept hearing stories about how difficult it was to access fresh, affordable groceries—especially for parents who don't drive or who rely on public transportation. Many were already choosing between [paying for a ride], food, or child care. We realized that if families couldn't easily get to the store, we needed to bring the store to them.

Over the years, grocery store closures on Peoria's South Side have turned daily routines into logistical challenges. "Something as simple as buying milk or produce can mean a 40-minute trip across town," Jacobie said. "We've seen parents stretch meals, skip fresh items, or rely on corner stores with limited options. It's not just about food—it's about time, energy, and dignity."

When last fall's government shutdown made the delivery of SNAP benefits uncertain, the team at Carver—along with residents, churches, a mosque, small business owners, and a local caterer—immediately took action. Together, they organized to make sure that families who were served by the center received weekend food bags throughout November 2025, filled with items that could stretch across several meals.

Jacobie is clear-eyed about both the power and the limits of local action. She emphasizes that addressing food access requires deep collaboration across schools, child care centers, local farms, nonprofits, churches, and other community partners—not isolated efforts working in silos. At the same time, she is firm that community response should not be expected to replace government responsibility. Families are not asking for handouts; they are asking for fairness and stability. What's unfolding in Peoria is not unique, but emblematic of what happens when safety nets weaken. While communities will always step up to care for one another, Jacobie stresses that sustainable, equitable investment in local food systems is essential—not just short-term emergency solutions—and that communities should not be left to carry this burden alone.

How the Peoria community responded to this crisis illustrates both the possibility and the limits of community response. SNAP is a comprehensive program that gives families the freedom to buy their own food with dignity and choice. No local program can match that scale or stability. But through collective care and deep collaboration, Peoria provided a model of what can happen when people don't wait on Washington to act.

WHAT COMMUNITIES CAN DO RIGHT NOW

Across the country, communities are coming together to make sure families can still access food, even as federal systems stall. These local efforts may not replace full SNAP benefits, but they can help bridge the gap and connect folks to people who care and want to help. If you or someone you know are worried about how to afford food, here are some resources:

- **Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA):** CSAs connect families directly to local farmers who grow fresh fruits and vegetables. You pay for a share of the harvest (sometimes using EBT or SNAP) and receive weekly boxes of produce. Many CSAs offer payment plans or sponsored shares for families with lower incomes. Find one near you through **LocalHarvest.org** or the **USDA CSA Directory**.
- **Farmers Markets:** Farmers markets are great places to find affordable, locally grown produce. Many now participate in programs like Double Up Food Bucks, which double the value of SNAP dollars spent on fruits and vegetables. To find a market in your area, visit the **USDA's National Farmers Market Directory.**
- **Community Gardens and Local Food Networks:** More communities are turning empty lots, schoolyards, and church spaces into gardens where neighbors can grow and share food together. You can search for local groups doing this work or connect through the **U.S. Food Sovereignty Alliance.**
- **Local Coalitions and Mutual Aid:** In some areas, community coalitions are coordinating efforts to fight hunger and deliver fresh food directly to families. For example, the **Ending Hunger Together Initiative** brings together local organizations in Central Illinois to get healthy food to those who need it most.

THE ROLE OF THE PUBLIC BENEFITS JUSTICE TEAM: BEING THE CONNECTIVE TISSUE BETWEEN COMMUNITY WISDOM AND FEDERAL POLICY

The **Public Benefits Justice team members at CLASP** see ourselves as learners and connectors. We are looking to listen to, learn from, and uplift the people and organizations who have been doing this work long before this moment. Our responsibility and our opportunity are to use our positionality and access to help connect the dots, bringing visibility to what's working, linking local efforts with policy and funding streams, and helping ensure these community-led solutions are supported, sustained, and protected.

We may not control what happens in Washington, but we do control how we show up for one another. Across the country, communities are already showing what food sovereignty looks like: people growing, sharing, and feeding each other with care and intention. That work deserves recognition, investment, and partnership.

At the same time, community cannot be the only backstop. Federal programs like SNAP must be restored and strengthened because families should not have to rely on emergency responses to survive. Both things must be true: We build strong community-based food systems, and we continue pushing for public policies that ensure people can eat with dignity.

If you are a local organization, community-based group, or individual organizer doing this work in your community, we want to hear from you. We're eager to connect, learn from your experience, and understand how we can be helpful and supportive of the work you are already leading**.**

Parker Gilkesson Davis, pgilkesson@clasp.org
Teon Hayes, thayes@clasp.org

Below, you'll find a list of food access resources by state and territory. If you know of a program or initiative helping families in your area, please take a moment to share it through the State-By-State Resources Form so we can keep this living resource growing and connect even more people to food and care.