Food security is one of the largest challenges facing rural towns across the nation. Lemhi County, Idaho, is no different. According to feedingamerica.org, 17% of Lemhi County residents are food insecure. Twenty-seven percent of the county’s children are food insecure and 18% of the population lives in poverty (Map the Meal Gap, 2015). A group of concerned citizens approached the University of Idaho Extension, Lemhi County office to organize a hunger summit to address food security in March 2015. In partnership with food system VISTA volunteers and Salmon Valley Stewardship, the first Lemhi County Hunger Summit was held.
FROM HUNGER SUMMIT TO COMMUNITY DINNERS
This first summit served to raise awareness of the problems facing the food insecure in Lemhi County and concluded with the development of four priorities that would guide the future planning of outreach and events. The four priorities that emerged were: 1) A Community Dinner Table; 2) A Hunger Resource Directory; 3) An event to continue work on hunger; and 4) A surplus harvest preservation program. A hunger resource directory including area food banks and other resources was quickly developed by the Lemhi County Extension Office. A second Hunger Summit was planned by a volunteer committee and headed by the Lemhi County Extension office, and surplus produce sharing and gleaning was mildly successful throughout the following growing season as headed by a VISTA volunteer.

In 2016, citizens reconvened to evaluate the progress that had been made in addressing food insecurity and revisited the priorities established the prior year. The surplus harvest team rallied again to begin work at the start of the 2016 growing season. The directory was updated and redistributed and the second Hunger Summit was successful with almost 30 community members in attendance. The then largest priority for the team was a Salmon Community Dinner program. Salmon is the county seat of Lemhi County and the hub of most community events. An action team was established and decided to offer a free community meal once a month to help community members fill their food gap and bring members of the community together.

The action team for the Salmon Community Dinner program identified its first goal was to feed hungry community members while secondarily building healthy relationships throughout the community with hopes of moving members out of poverty. In Ruby Payne’s book Bridges out of Poverty, Social Capital development is an important piece in helping individuals move out of poverty (Payne, 1999). Social Capital is best defined as a culture of trust and tolerance where networks and associations can develop (Inglehart, 2015). Social networks are valuable places where similar people bond and diverse people build social bridges (Dekker et al., 2006). The Salmon Community Dinner program capitalized on the rich social capital environment developed during the dinners with participating members from several socio-economic classes, religious affiliations, and lifestyles.

The first Salmon Community Dinner, hosted by the Salmon Community Dinner Table Team, was held in August 2016 with two-hundred community members in attendance. Members from the Salmon Valley Local Foods provided fresh salads with harvests from their gardens, and the event was held at Railroad Park, a park privately owned by the local grocery store and provided for free for the event. The dinner was the first of 13 community dinners held to date. An average of 200 community members attend

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each dinner with the record of 400 members at the 2016 December dinner. Menus have ranged from baked potatoes to turkey dinner. The dinners are offered August through June. They began as a once-a-month offering in 2016 and have now expanded to twice a month during the winter months when food security is more of an issue for the community’s citizens.

VOLUNTEERS LEAD THE WAY
The volunteer-led committee is headed by a local businessman concerned about hunger in the community. The group meets twice monthly under the guidance of the University of Idaho Extension Lemhi County office to organize dinners. Dinners are held at the Salmon BPOE Elk’s Hall in the winter and Railroad Park in the summer and are free to the public. They are hosted by a different organization each month. The hosting organization or organizations provide a majority of the food and supplies and help to serve the dinner. A volunteer musical group has played during most of the dinners. The group has received one grant from North West Farm Credit Services to purchase tables and chairs for the outdoor dinner and the remainder of the operational funds have come from private and local business donations. Hosts have included four faith-based organizations, two non-profits, a local business and the school district. There is a waiting list for dinner hosts six dinners in advance to date.

SURVEYING THE COMMUNITY DINNER ATTENDEES
During the 2017 March and April dinners, attendees were surveyed with either an on-the-spot survey or a written survey. 219 adult dinner attendees participated in the on-the-spot survey conducted at the door while attendees waited in line to receive food. 78 adult attendees participated in the written survey that was located on tables with pencils and survey drop boxes. In total, the team collected 297 completed surveys.

The on-the-spot surveyors asked attendees to
place sticker dots under the headings that best represented the two main reasons they attended the community dinner:

- 71% reported that a sense of community was one of the most important reasons they attend the dinners;
- 37% stated that the meal was an important reason for attending;
- 32% came to meet new people, and these were followed by the music, conversation, and something to do, respectively.

When asked what had changed since first coming to a community dinner:

- 36% of respondents said their sense of community had improved
- 83% of survey participants said they met new people at the dinners

Although only 34% of participants said they were dependent on the meal, it is indispensable to others. One participant reported, “I would be home struggling to feed me and my family. People care and are concerned for my situation. It reminds me that there are still good people in Salmon and that people in the community care.”

One respondent stated they have made associations with new people and another was inspired to do more in their community. Another reported that the dinners changed their mind about a particular hosting organization, noting how kind they were to donate a community dinner.

In addition to feeding Salmon’s hungry, the dinners are bringing several diverse audiences together. Anecdotally, committee members have reported that their fellow church members had never been inside the Salmon BPOE Elk Lodge because of fear it would violate their church’s abstinence from alcohol since the building houses a bar. But now they are partnering with other faith-based organizations to host dinners and crossing religious affiliations to collaborate on these efforts.

**SUPPORTING ADDITIONAL COMMUNITY PROGRAMS**

In September 2017, the group began to reach out and serve other food security programs in the area including the school backpack program, which sends children in need home with backpacks of food to feed them over the weekends. Youth, who may not have access to food in the home, are provided with a backpack full of ready-to-eat or easy-to-make foods. The program currently serves 84 youth in the school district.

The group has also helped local boy scouts build Little Pantry boxes housed at three locations throughout town. The pantries are stocked by volunteer donations with food and personal hygiene products. The group plans to begin implementing a summer sack lunch program in June 2017 and offer it twice a month to youth in need during the area schools’ summer recess.

The committee has been excited to see both resource-limited and resource-abundant community members coming together and meeting each other at the community dinners. One participant reported, “These dinners have changed how our family views ‘community.’ We have never lived in a place, until Salmon, that brings the community together like this. We love it.” Another stated that, “A town that eats together, stays together.”