

impact

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Community dinners meet the increasing need in bringing people together

AT A GLANCE

Salmon's Community Dinner Table has been in operation for seven years. Since its beginning, it has focused on addressing food insecurity and bringing people together.

The Situation

Food insecurity continues to be a problem many in Lemhi County face. About 17.4% of Lemhi County residents are food insecure, compared to the state rate of 14.7%. Food insecurity targets the youth particularly, with 17.4% of Lemhi County's youth being food insecure, the third highest rate in the state. The Salmon Community Dinner Table, because of an extension summit, has been serving free dinners nearly once a month to the community since 2016. Local organizations host dinners, which are free to all community members.

Our Response

A group of volunteers led by a board and local UI Extension educator as an executive director has annually organized monthly dinners from September to June. The volunteers guide community organizations by hosting dinners. Often there is music to enjoy during the meals in the local Elks' Lodge and at local parks. On average, 150-200 people attend each dinner. Even through COVID-19 restrictions, the group hosted drive-through events.



Community members enjoy dinner at the park at the June 2022 Salmon Community Dinner Table. Photo by Katie McFarland.

Program Outcomes

In 2017, one year after the Salmon Community Dinner Table started, a survey was conducted to see if the dinners were meeting outcomes. It was concluded that many needed the meals, and they were meeting new people and feeling a larger sense of community. Attendees reported that the top two reasons they attended were for a sense of community and meeting new people. Five years after this survey, the committee thought ensuring the events were still meeting goals would be useful. In late 2022 an on-the-spot survey was conducted, and a paper survey was distributed during the dinner. Of the dinner attendees, 85 participated in the written survey and 84 in the on-the-spot survey. This was roughly half of the dinner attendees.

By comparing the statistics from 2017 to 2022 regarding whether individuals met new people, there appears to be a notable shift in social experiences. In 2017, only 13% of respondents acknowledged meeting new people, while 86% did not. However, as the data moves forward to 2022, the percentage of people who reported meeting new individuals increased to 23%, indicating a rise in social interactions. On the other hand, the percentage of those who did not meet new people decreased to 77%. These statistics imply that, over those five years, there was a modest but discernible increase in social engagement.

The statistics comparing the perceived meal needs in 2017 and 2022 show interesting trends. In 2017, many respondents, 66%, stated that they did not need the meal at all, followed by 22% who felt they needed it a little. A smaller portion, 8%, indicated a moderate level of need, while only 4% expressed a strong need for the meal. However, the numbers shifted in 2022, with a decrease in the percentage of people who didn't need the meal, dropping to 51%. Similarly, the category of needing the meal a little saw a slight decline to 23%. Conversely, the proportions of those who felt somewhat or very much in need of the meal increased to 17% and 9%, respectively. These statistics suggest a shift towards a higher overall perceived need for meals between 2017 and 2022 and an increased need for food resources like community dinners.

The on-the-spot survey revealed that in 2022, 44% of those surveyed came to the community dinners for a sense of community, 22% for the conversation and the meal, and 12% for something to do. The statistics comparing participation in community dinners in 2017 and 2022 highlight the motivations behind individuals' engagement in such events. In 2017, 29% of participants said they joined community dinners for a sense of community, emphasizing the importance of fostering connections and belonging. Additionally, 8%

mentioned participating in conversations, indicating the value placed on social interaction and dialogue. Furthermore, 28% stated that they enjoyed or needed the meal.

Moreover, 11% reported joining community dinners for something to do, suggesting that these events offered a source of activity and engagement. Comparing these figures to 2022, there was an interesting shift in motivations. The percentage of participants seeking a sense of community increased significantly to 44%, indicating a growing recognition of the importance of communal bonds. Similarly, the desire for conversation rose to 22%, suggesting an increased appreciation for meaningful dialogue and exchange. However, the proportion of individuals attending for the enjoyment or need of the meal decreased to 22%, potentially indicating a shift in priorities or changing circumstances. Additionally, the motivation for something to do remained relatively stable at 12%. These statistics imply that while the motivations for participating in community dinners evolved, the desire for a sense of community and the value of conversation remained prominent in 2022.

When asked what attending the dinners has changed for them in 2022, respondents said, "My outlook-I'm socially anxious, so this is my first time to one. I felt welcome and comfortable! Thank you," and "Makes me more proud of my community and how everybody comes together." They also stated that it changed "The Night-Very blessed this dinner came because I didn't know how I would eat." and "It has helped me to be more social and put myself out to enjoy neighbors and new friends." The dinner continues after five years to help feed and unite the community.

Cooperators and Co-Sponsors

Non-profit organization Salmon Community Dinner Table.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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