

## **Four organizations combat food insecurity in the UT Austin area**

One in three University of Texas students faced food insecurity in 2022, according to the student government's Food Security Agency. This is about three times higher than the national average reported by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

“Honestly, I believe it's even higher than that because I feel like there's kind of a stigma or like a taboo kind of thing about people being food insecure,” said Elisabeth Jimenez, a senior who works for UT Farm Stand.

On a national scale, the USDA reports Texas is the second leading state in food insecurity for all ages. One in eight people experiences food insecurity in the state, which translates to roughly 4 million people, according to Feeding Texas. Additionally, West Campus, an area primarily composed of UT students, is about 2.6 miles away from the nearest supermarket. The neighborhood qualifies as a food desert, an area where nutritious food is scarce and inaccessible.

“Food insecurity can even be temporary,” said Erica Howard, founder and co-director of UT’s Food Security Agency. “Maybe you had to fix your computer or put a down payment for something. So maybe just for a month, you’re food insecure. It can be anyone.”

Many students who live in West Campus lack access to cars. While the CapMetro bus system is free for UT students, there is only one bus route to the closest grocery store.

“I don't think anyone's writing five-star Yelp reviews about the Austin public transportation system,” Howard said. “If you want to take the bus to the grocery store, that's your day.”

Meanwhile, small food markets within walking distance of campus like Orange Market, Target and Wheatsville Co-Op are more expensive and have lower supply than other grocery stores, said Mayahuel Crane, a UT sophomore who led efforts to build a campus community pantry with ATX Free Fridge.

Alternatively, students have the option to order groceries from supermarkets through delivery services like Instacart. However, item upcharges, delivery fees and tips make these services more expensive.

“Anything that's nearby (and) convenient is a lot more expensive,” Crane said. “You either have to pay for delivery, which is expensive, or you have to find a means to get there.”

According to the USDA, marginalized and low-income communities are more likely to live in food deserts. In these neighborhoods, ultra-processed, calorie-dense meal options are cheap and highly

available. These disparities contribute to health inequities, as the consumption of these foods leads to higher rates of chronic illnesses and disease, according to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#).

People of color are also more likely to be food insecure. According to [Feeding America](#), Black Americans experience food insecurity more than twice as often as white Americans. In Travis County, 11% of Black people live in areas of low food access, compared to only 5% of white people, according to the [2022 State of the Food System Report](#).

“Queer students, students of color and first-generation students are incredibly marginalized,” Howard said. “It’s an ‘us’ issue, but there definitely are students who need to be incorporated into the solution that I don’t think are being incorporated very well at this time.”

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### UT Farm Stand - Clara Carrabba

The University of Texas Farm Stand sells fresh, affordable food biweekly to promote food security and sustainability on campus.

“We try to make fresh produce accessible to people, and make it lower cost,” said Elisabeth Jimenez, a senior who works for the stand. “We also don’t necessarily look to make a profit. As long as we break even, that’s fine. We’re definitely not trying to upcharge or anything.”

The stand brings the experience of an open-air farmer’s market to many students’ front doors, occurring at Jester Corner. The organization offers seasonal produce and specialty items with low price tags every other week on the corner of 21st Street and Speedway. The student-led group sources from its gardens and local farmers, working with food security organizations like the West Campus Collective, UT Outpost and ATX Free Fridge to alleviate the stress of finding cheap, nutritious food at UT.

The farm stand is divided into three teams: market, gardens and zero-waste. They are working to create a more sustainable reality at UT while providing students with affordable, fresh ingredients.

Jimenez, who works for the market team, said she feels the worry of food security firsthand.

“It’s just so hard to have access to fresh meals around campus. Even the cost of everything is insane,” Jimenez said. “There’s just so many barriers to access good, healthy, fresh produce, so that’s why I really appreciate UT Farm Stand.”

The group has come up with many ways to address the gaps contributing to student food insecurity.

“Toward the last hour of our market, we have a bargain bag. You fill a huge bag with any type of produce that you want for \$5,” Jimenez said. “We have little recipe bags that we try to make dorm-friendly for students as well.”

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## UT Outpost - Sarah Matthews

The UT Outpost reopened its doors to University of Texas students on March 27 after a two-week closure due to maintenance. The campus-based food pantry and career closet specializes in providing access to food and business clothing for students.

In 2018, the Outpost opened in a small office on campus and initially focused on supplying pre-made bags of food for students, said Valeria Martin, the university's assistant director for basic needs. It now functions as a free grocery store, where students may take up to 25 pounds of food per month and two to three professional outfits per semester.

Students visiting the Outpost only need to show their UT ID to receive food or clothing, Martin said.

"There is a lot of stigma around food insecurity and financial hardship that can make anyone, particularly students, feel uncomfortable, nervous or even shameful that they have to ask for help in meeting a basic need," Martin said. "That's why we exist, and we try our best to make our students feel comfortable when they come into this space."

The food pantry consists of shelf-stable options like pasta, rice and canned goods, but also features access to fresh fruits and vegetables. UT Microfarm, a student-run farm and garden, and UT Farm Stand, a low-cost, student-run farmer's market, provide additional produce for the Outpost.

Over time, the Outpost has faced challenges such as closures due to the pandemic and renovations. However, Martin said she believes the staff's resiliency has kept the Outpost going.

"It's been a bit of a journey with some bumps in the road with the pandemic," Martin said. "But I think overall we're really at a place where students know what this resource is and are coming to visit us, which is ultimately what we want."

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## ATX Free Fridge Project (West Campus Pantry) - Lucia Llano

ATX Free Fridge Project opened a new pantry location in West Campus on April 6. About 20 people gathered at Pearl Street Co-Op for the launch.

The mutual aid organization has been fighting food insecurity in Austin since 2020. This marks its sixth community pantry in the city. The free fridge team decides where to build their pantries based on community needs. People from neighborhoods in need will often ask them for support and take on the responsibility of finding a host location for the fridge.

Unlike other food services, the free fridge has no barriers to access. It's entirely self-service and open 24/7. There are no qualifications, lines or restricted hours, and the University of Texas location is just a

15-minute walk from farther parts of campus. The only requirement is that the community balances maintaining the fridge and reaping its benefits.

“It's (about) giving and taking without expectation. It's all about supporting the community and having solidarity with your neighbors,” said Nitza Cuevas, one of the five organizers for ATX Free Fridge.

Unfortunately, supply can be sporadic at a pantry that relies entirely on community support. Engagement at other locations used to be higher during the pandemic when people had more time and government support, Cuevas said. Now, part of the problem is the need for food is often higher than people's ability to give.

“We know the need is really high. We get people messaging us. We get photos and updates that the fridges are empty. So I think as soon as food is dropped off, it's all taken,” Cuevas said. “That can be hard. You want people to take only what they need.”

With only five members on their volunteer team, Cuevas said it can be difficult to maintain the pantries, apart from all their additional responsibilities. Despite the hurdles, Cuevas said the pantries are successful in building community and providing hope.

Families have messaged the team grateful to have secured a meal on nights they had no food to feed their children. At the West Campus opening, members of the ATX Free Fridge Team met someone who had recently started supporting a sibling with addiction and was relying on the pantry for extra food and Narcan in case of emergency.

“The world feels very hard to exist in,” Cuevas said. “For me, this is the only way I feel like I can keep on going. To build a community is the only way that feels good. And this is immediate community.”

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#### Grocery Shuttle Service - Giorgy Ruiz

A grocery shuttle pilot program for University of Texas students is underway to address food insecurity on campus.

Led by the Food Security Agency, a student government agency dedicated to ensuring food security for all students, this free shuttle service will transport students to a local H-E-B grocery store, with assistance from Parking and Transportation Services. By offering convenient and accessible transportation, the program seeks to reduce barriers to food access.

“Getting food on campus was a struggle for me,” freshman Rodrick Keller said. “I try to eat healthy, but never have time to go to the grocery store and I am always studying late so by the time I head to my dorm, all campus restaurants are closed. Either way, they run my pockets so much, I prefer making my own food.”

The shuttle operates by appointment only and runs on select Saturdays and Sundays from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Students are allowed to reserve one spot per day on the shuttle. The two pickup locations for students are Dobie Twenty21 and the Almetris Duren Residence Hall.

“I could never go to H-E-B during the week due to my classes and not having a car,” Keller said. “I heard about the shuttle and it was a perfect time frame for me.”

The shuttle prioritizes inclusivity by accommodating students with disabilities and ensuring wheelchair accessibility. It is expected to help students by providing a reliable and affordable means to access essential groceries.

“Don’t get me wrong, I like to use the bus, but it is always so crowded and the routes are so confusing,” Keller said. “It also can be intimidating for first-years. But with a system like this, I know my friends and I will feel safer commuting with fellow students.”

By providing transportation to a nearby grocery store, the food shuttle will empower students to make healthier and more affordable food choices, Keller said. This initiative not only aims to alleviate immediate challenges related to food access but also contributes to fostering a more inclusive and supportive campus environment.

“I am definitely gonna use this system in the future,” Keller said. “I can eat healthier and cook more, even if it’s in my dorm kitchen. It beats fast food every day.”