

## **Assessing food insecurity in Saint Paul Neighborhood Food Project**

The Neighborhood Food Project is a grassroots effort to address food security issues in four neighborhoods in Saint Paul: Dayton's Bluff, Payne-Phalen, Thomas-Dale/Frogtown, and Summit-University. It began with a partnership among four organizations (The Minnesota Project, Community Design Center of Minnesota, Minnesota Food Association, and Afro Eco) that are committed to neighborhood revitalization, sustainable food production, and equitable food distribution. In 2009, the partnership obtained a planning grant to assess the food needs of these communities.

### ***How was the assessment conducted?***

At the onset of the project, a Community Advisory Group was established to guide the development of the assessment process and sharing of results. With input from the Advisory Group, the project partners developed an assessment plan to understand where residents of the target neighborhoods currently purchase food, barriers to healthy eating, strategies to address these barriers, and suggestions for changes that can be made in their neighborhood to increase the availability of healthy foods. The multi-method assessment approach included resident surveys and focus groups conducted in English, Spanish, Hmong, and Somali, ensuring input from the most predominant cultural communities in the neighborhoods. After the assessment was completed, two community dinners were held to share the results with residents and gather suggestions on ways to address the concerns that were identified through the assessment.

### **Key findings from the assessment**

- **Most residents are interested in learning more about healthy eating and improving their overall diet.** Most of the survey respondents were at least somewhat interested in eating more healthy foods, and many residents who participated in the focus groups were also interested in improving their health. Although

food consumption was not measured in a comprehensive manner, self-reported eating habits indicate there is room for improvement. Less than one-third of survey respondents reported eating multiple servings of fruits or vegetables on an average day.

- **Common barriers to healthy eating include the cost of fresh fruits and vegetables, location of markets and other stores, quality of perishable food items, and time needed to cook and prepare food.** Among some focus group participants, the cost of food is perceived to be higher in Minnesota than in other states. The lack of culturally-specific markets and limited availability of culturally-specific foods in larger grocery stores are also barriers to healthy eating among specific cultural groups as well as among residents who enjoy cooking a variety of foods.
- **Food security is an issue for many survey respondents. Over half of the survey respondents reported that they had run out of money to buy food at least once during the past three months.** Although a number of residents who responded to the survey and participated in the focus groups used local food shelves, others relied on informal help from friends and family. Within the Hmong and Somali community, loans could be made from culturally-specific markets to pay for groceries or other expenses.
- **Some residents with lower household incomes purchase food from stores that do not typically have the lowest prices.** Although the cost of various food items was not assessed for this project, recent studies have demonstrated individuals typically pay more and have a smaller selection of healthy items when shopping at convenience stores and small markets instead of supermarkets. Results from this resident survey indicated lower-income residents were more likely to shop at small neighborhood stores and convenience stores, and were less likely to garden.

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- **There are significant differences and gaps in the types of stores and food resource availability across the four neighborhoods.** Although this project did not include an inventory of places residents can purchase or receive food in each of the four neighborhoods, results from the survey and focus group discussions indicate limited availability of healthy shopping options in the four neighborhoods. Very few options were identified by residents in the Dayton’s Bluff and Summit-University neighborhoods. A number of residents reported shopping regularly at stores in other St. Paul neighborhoods or outside of the city. Overall, only one of every five respondents from Dayton’s Bluff and Summit-University shopped in their own neighborhood, compared to at least three-quarters of the respondents in the Frogtown/Thomas-Dale and Payne-Phalen neighborhoods.
- **Limited transportation options affects food purchasing options.** To make shopping easier, strategies to provide transportation alternatives (such as neighborhood shuttles) for residents who bus, taxi, and walk to stores may be needed.
- **Residents have very different levels of familiarity with the resources available in their neighborhoods, including smaller markets and food shelves.** During focus groups discussions, the stores, markets, and other food resources (e.g., food shelves) that some residents frequently visited were unfamiliar to others. Some

participants felt that it would be helpful to have a resource booklet or online resource that listed local stores, especially local farmer’s markets, culturally-specific markets, specialty markets (e.g., meat markets), and food shelves.

- **Residents offered a variety of suggestions for increasing access to healthy foods.** Many residents identified lowering the price of fruits and vegetables as an important way to increase the availability of healthy foods. Residents also suggested: increasing the number of farmer’s markets in neighborhoods or expanding the hours of existing markets; providing residents with classes on healthy cooking; and expanding the number of healthy options on restaurant menus. One-third of the survey respondents felt increasing the number of stores accepting food stamps or WIC vouchers or having access to new or improved supermarkets would help improve the accessibility of healthy foods.

### *What are the next steps for this initiative?*

The four partner organizations are reviewing the assessment results and feedback gathered from residents during the community meetings to determine strategies to address issues related to food security and access to healthy foods in these neighborhoods. The partners may continue their work in another shared initiative or develop individual strategies that align with the expertise of each organization.

### **MORE ABOUT THE ASSESSMENT**

A total of 478 residents completed the survey in English, Spanish, and Hmong and 12 focus groups were held (in English, Spanish, Hmong, and Somali) across the targeted Saint Paul neighborhoods. Planning grant support came from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Community Food Project. Additional support for the project came from the Saint Paul–Ramsey County Public Health Department as part of its Statewide Health Improvement Program (SHIP) initiative. Wilder Research was contracted by the Saint Paul–Ramsey County Public Health Department to assist the Neighborhood Food Group organizations with data collection activities and provide the partners with a technical report summarizing the assessment results.

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