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Local Food for Lewiston:

Exploring the Role of Food Assessment as Part of Broader Work in Community-engaged Food Systems¹

By Kirsten Walter

This case study tells the story of a work in progress: a community effort that explores the relationship between grassroots action and a more strategic approach to building a healthy food system. Intuition tells us that we need a balanced blend of both elements. We are learning that at least two other factors are critical: the ability to use multiple strategies in concert, and the dexterity to move up and down the spectrum of research, planning, and action with grace. Faced with a challenging learning curve, we are relying upon a strong foundation of community-based work to guide this journey into food assessment and planning.

HISTORY

The St. Mary's Nutrition Center in Lewiston, Maine, historically used programmatic approaches to create fair access to healthy, local foods. The simplest way to describe this work is to employ a laundry list: 12 community gardens for low-income families; hands-on cooking and nutrition education for all ages; garden-education programs for children; intensive job-training programs for teens; fresh-food-access

points including three farmers' markets; culturally relevant peer-led nutrition education and emergency food distribution that serves more than 60 percent of all food boxes in the city. Combined, these activities create a potent mix for grass-roots change.

We began, however, to ask ourselves a daunting question: if the Nutrition Center and its partners just continued the on-the-ground work, or even multiplied it tenfold, would Lewiston have a thriving, secure, and just food system?

In a city with a childhood poverty rate of nearly 42 percent and with a downtown elementary school where 94 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price meal programs, it was important to take the question seriously.

The honest answer seemed to be "no." In response, the Nutrition Center initiated a multi-sector response to food and nutrition needs as a fundamental approach to preventative health. The initiative, now called "Local Food for Lewiston (LFL)," brought together diverse stakeholders to conduct a community food assessment (CFA) to enable us to better understand the landscape of local food insecurity and food systems.

COMMUNITY FOOD ASSESSMENTS: LEWISTON'S APPROACH

Local Food for Lewiston is a collaborative effort guided by a core group: Healthy Androscoggin, St. Mary's Nutrition Center, the Downtown Education Collaborative, and the Harvard Center for Community Partnerships at Bates College. These partners bring diverse expertise in the fields of public health, local food and nutrition, and community-engaged academic research. From this core, the effort has grown to include residents as participants in research and as researchers, along with many other stakeholders. Academic partners at the University of Southern Maine's Lewiston-Auburn campus, Muskie

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School of Public Service, and Bates College guided the CFA design and methodology.

The CFA's research focuses on the following:

- To what extent is household food insecurity a problem in Lewiston and who is at high risk?
- What does the food resource environment look like? Is healthy food available, accessible, and affordable? Where do people get healthy foods?
- What are the specific barriers that prevent people from accessing healthy food in Lewiston? How do people get to their food sources?
- To what extent is household food insecurity in Lewiston determined by community food resources; accessibility, availability, and affordability of healthy foods; and/or socioeconomic, demographic, and geographic characteristics?
- What resources and community factors are assets in strengthening our food system?

The research has been more heavily weighted on the consumer sector of the food system, in large part a reflection of the Nutrition Center's mission and past work. The CFA looked primarily at the municipality of Lewiston, even though the city is a part of the larger Lewiston/Auburn metropolitan area. Limited resources affect the scope of the research, and because most secondary data is available at a county or city level, we decided to keep to the city boundaries.

The overarching principles guiding the methodology were that the research should be useful for community planning and developing solutions and be robust and of high quality, while being grounded by community-based approaches. We used multiple methods to balance qualitative and quantitative data. For the quantitative part, the collaborative gathered secondary economic and demographic data, which included a survey of food stores and emergency food providers, and GIS mapping of these resources along with fast-food outlets and transportation routes. To compliment these data, we conducted a series of focus groups, interviews, and photo essays to elicit detailed information about residents' experiences with the food system. Community action researchers (CARs) conducted a majority of the

qualitative data gathering for the CFA and continue to be key components of LFL's leadership group. The CARs are community members who have deep connections in Lewiston and have been advocating for low-income populations for many years.

A FEW OF THE FINDINGS

The findings reflect trends seen in other communities and the anecdotal evidence gathered from over a decade of community-based food work.

Food Stores and Fast Food

We know we need nutritious food but we can't afford it. If you buy nutritious food every time you go to the store, the children will be hungry next week.

Out of the 59 stores selling fresh and prepackaged foods in Lewiston, 19 percent accepted WIC, 58 percent accepted EBT/SNAP, 100 percent sold soda, 68 percent sold beer, and 31 percent sold cigarettes. In comparison, only 12 percent carried any variety of healthy foods (at least one item from at least six of the seven healthy food categories). Supermarkets were 40 percent less expensive than the community markets, but were not located in low-income neighborhoods, whereas fast-food restaurants were clustered near these neighborhoods.

Put simply, there are far more options for unhealthy foods than healthy foods in close vicinity to low-income households, and prices are higher. These trends could describe many towns and cities across the country. But, what is interesting about Lewiston is that the low-income downtown residential area is also home to several mid-sized community markets that fall in the 12 percent of stores that carry a variety of healthy foods. These stores, along with the many Somali-owned halal markets, are critical resources with great potential for being part of a more vibrant food environment in the future.

Emergency Food Access

Less than 50 percent of single-parent households live within 1 kilometer of a soup kitchen or a food pantry. Nearly all emergency food pantries (EFPs),

however, are close to a bus line. The CFA charted the hours of EFP operation along with the hours buses operate. This information can be used to help emergency food providers to identify and address gaps in service.

Transportation

I have to go to the bigger stores. They don't even sell whole pasta, zucchini, or squash in the little stores.

Lewiston's public bus, CityLink, is a relatively affordable and moderately used system. Buses run from 6 A.M. to 6 P.M. on weekdays, and CityLink recently added a few routes on Saturdays from 9 to 3. Many buses travel directly to grocery stores in the area and are therefore an important means of accessing food for people without cars. Through surveys, interviews, photo, and documentation of travel time, the CFA examined the benefits and challenges related to transportation. Those who use the bus must limit their grocery purchases to what they can carry. Less nutrient-dense foods are often lighter and therefore easier to carry. More frequent trips to the store are necessary for regular access to perishable foods, requiring more time for transportation and shopping.

NEXT STEPS: PLANNING AND ACTION

The next phase, a community planning process, will result in three major outcomes: (1) five- and 15-year community vision "road maps"; (2) a clear action plan; and (3) a community food council. The council will oversee implementation efforts, guide local policy, and provide long-term sustainability. This will be a diverse group, including government agencies and officials, community organizations, advocacy groups, community members, farmers, and local civic and community leaders.

It will be critical in this phase to master the delicate ebb and flow of planning and action. The Nutrition Center and LFL will keep the on-the-ground work going throughout the planning process. This summer, the Nutrition Center is leading some exciting projects designed in response to the preliminary assessment findings, including expanded farmers' market sites; innovative incentive programs to increase access

to fresh food for low-income individuals at farmers' markets; and as a new FoodCorps site, expanded school garden programs in the fall.

CONCLUSION

Having a clear understanding of a community's access (or lack of) to quality food and engaging stakeholders in the planning process create the foundation and excitement needed for finding effective solutions. The assessment and subsequent road map serve as important tools. They help to raise awareness, provide educational opportunities, and aid in securing additional resources to create long-lasting solutions for providing access to healthy, local food. Additionally, they broaden the base of support and the community's capacity to respond with effective, committed action. The momentum and energy garnered by Local Food for Lewiston will be crucial in propelling work on our food systems in the years to come. 🌱

ENDNOTE

1. Some language for this article was modified from the draft of our community report, which has many authors who were involved in Local Food for Lewiston.



Photo: J. Gonzalez

Kirsten Walter began her food systems work in Lewiston, Maine, by founding Lots to Gardens in 1999. She now serves as director of the St. Mary's Nutrition Center.