

COMMUNITY FOOD ASSESSMENT

LEWISTON, MAINE 2013



Good Food Council of Lewiston-Auburn

Executive Summary

Access the report at www.goodfood4la.org

Research Highlights:

- Up to half of households in some areas, including downtown neighborhoods, do not have access to a vehicle;
- Healthy food is on average 40% more expensive than the same food in stores on Lewiston's outskirts;
- The percentages of students eligible for free or reduced lunch in Lewiston's downtown elementary schools, Montello and Longley, are 79% and 98%, respectively; and
- The percentage of the Lewiston population using the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as food stamps) was 35.96% in 2012 – nearly twice the state average of 19.17%.
- Of 64 stores selling food in Lewiston, only three supermarkets and four neighborhood markets had at least six out of seven types of food identified as healthy. These healthy foods include: Fresh fruit, fresh vegetables, whole grains, frozen vegetables, lean meats, low-fat dairy, and canned/dry vegetables.

CFA Support

Many people and organizations made the CFA possible. Special thanks goes out to the following supporters:

Lead Partners

Downtown Education Collaborative
Harvard Center for Community Partnerships at Bates College
Healthy Androscoggin
St. Mary's Nutrition Center

Primary Investigators

Bates College Academic Departments
Community Action Researchers, composed of community members
Muskie School of Public Service
University of Southern Maine



Community Food Assessment: Lewiston

The Lewiston, Maine Community Food Assessment (CFA) takes a close look at how food works in the Lewiston-Auburn area. It looks at what is working well and what challenges exist. In particular, the report focuses on hunger and the resources that are used to combat it as well as which groups of people face the greatest challenges in accessing healthy food.

The CFA is the result of several years of work. During this time a great deal of research was carried out by community members, college students, professors and others. In addition, the Lewiston community was invited to share opinions and experiences about food at multiple gatherings, both large and small. The report represents the voices of many Lewiston-Auburn residents and other members of the community who have taken part in CFA activities.

The type of information that was gathered was determined by a group of basic questions:

- What is the portrait of the community in relation to food?
- What are the opportunities for and barriers to accessing *good food* in Lewiston?
- How do all factors connect to influence access to *good food* in Lewiston?

Early in the process, it was decided that the Community Food Assessment was not going to be a comprehensive,

academic research project. Instead, it was flexibly built to engage a wide array of community members and to develop an understanding of food access by gathering data and stories from those who live and/or work in Lewiston.

The CFA Process

St. Mary's Nutrition Center initiated the CFA. Soon after, the Harvard Center for Community Partnerships and the Downtown Education Collaborative joined the effort and linked the community with academic partners from local colleges. The assessment grew to include residents as researchers and participants in focus groups, along with numerous other stakeholders such as local market owners, school administrators, farmers, and local college students.

The research behind this report focused on Lewiston at the outset, but expanded to include Auburn for a better understanding of food issues impacting the larger community.

Realizing that the work would not stop after the research was complete, several organizations came together with the purpose of sustaining the work of increasing access to *good food* by initiating collaboration between municipal government, local agencies, educational institutions, hospitals, and local residents. This collaboration evolved into the Good Food Council of Lewiston-Auburn to develop

solutions to improve the food system of the Lewiston-Auburn community, and to support the implementation of these solutions. The Good Food Council is made up of stakeholders from diverse backgrounds and brings many perspectives to bear on the issues facing the local food system.

The Council is working to facilitate solutions that will result in long-term change with broad benefit. The group is now hard at work using the data in the CFA to build thoughtful solutions, and, as the Council continues its efforts, the CFA will serve as a baseline by which to measure progress in building a healthier food system. Going forward, through advocacy and action, the Council will be engaging the Lewiston-Auburn community and building partnerships to forge solutions to meet the challenges identified in this report.

Why do a Food Assessment?

The reason for producing a CFA for Lewiston is simple: to build effective ways to fight hunger and to promote *good food* the community first needs to understand the food “landscape” (also called the food system), which this CFA was designed to do. This assessment provides an invaluable tool for recognizing and understanding needs and opportunities

The communities of Lewiston-Auburn are strong, but the food system that feeds them clearly needs repairing. Access to *good food* is a significant challenge for many Lewiston residents, which has a measurable, daily impact on health, leading to such diet-related problems as obesity and diabetes. Unfortunately for many residents, financial challenges make it difficult for them to afford quality food. For example, in 2012 the percentage of Lewiston food stamp recipients (36.96%) was almost twice the state average (19.17%); unfortunately, this trend continues. The food system’s problems will continue to negatively impact the lives of Lewiston residents each day until the food system is better understood and improved. The CFA is meant to provide the research to maximize the impact of ongoing and new efforts to improve the food system. The assessment is a tool for everyone who wants to make Lewiston-Auburn a better place to live.

For more than 10 years, projects, organizations, and individuals have helped make healthy food more accessible in the Lewiston area, improving the quality of life for many residents.

However, the needs that remain are so overwhelming that wider changes must be made to the overall food system that influences what food is available for consumers and what opportunities exist for local food and agriculture business to succeed.

The data and stories collected in the CFA will inform how these changes are carried out, allowing for a more widespread impact on the health of the community. Additionally, the CFA was designed to include a wide array of community members, so that their involvement could continue after the research, as plans to improve the food system are created and carried out.

The CFA was designed to be a first step in building a healthier local food system. The goal, from the outset, was to gain a better understanding of where food comes from, how food-related decisions are made, what food-related resources are available and the systemic and individual challenges of securing access to *good food*.

By bringing together into one place existing data and complementing that secondary data with community research, the CFA provides valuable information that can be used to guide next steps.

In particular, this report and the process behind it:

- has identified challenges (demographic, economic, cultural and geographic) that are limiting access to *good food*;
- has captured actual experiences and stories (via qualitative data) from residents facing daily challenges in accessing healthy food;
- has increased food system awareness thanks to a high level of local engagement through data collection, focus groups and community meetings;
- will function as a benchmark upon which to gauge progress; and
- will provide a strong base for taking action and conducting future research.

What is *Good Food*?

The term *good food* is used throughout the CFA. As report authors, our concept of what *good food* is composed of is at the heart of this CFA. Our understanding of *good food* is based upon the following.

Ideally, we want to eat food that:

- provides us with the nutrients needed to lead healthy, active lives and to enable children to learn and play well
- fits our cultural and religious beliefs
- is grown in ways that treats producers and employees with respect and that provides them with a livable wage
- supports local businesses
- nourishes both our bodies and the Earth—so that our soil and water can provide the nutrients needed to grow food in the future
- comes from animals treated humanely

We are working to create a system where accessing the ideal *good food* is possible for everyone. However, we know that this is not the current reality; for some people the priority is just getting enough to eat.

We encourage you to consider your own circumstances and to create a personal definition of what *good food* means to you, and to be open to revising that definition. We encourage you to keep this definition in mind as you use this report to help make *good food* more accessible to everyone in Lewiston-Auburn or in your own community.



Good Food Council of Lewiston-Auburn

2013–2014 members:

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Community Action

Karen Bolduc, Food Joy/South Auburn
Organic Farm

Christine Bosse, Bangor Savings Bank

Deborah Morrill Burd, St. Mary's
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* – 2013



Findings

What emerged is a clear picture of the food resources available to area residents and the challenges faced by many in the community.

The CFA research found that much work is currently being done to alleviate hunger in Lewiston-Auburn. The report catalogues the many efforts to provide emergency food for those in need. It looks at government and community-based aid and at efforts to increase local food production, such as help for family farms. It shares information about nutrition education outreach and social programs for seniors and others. And, finally, through stories it shows how many people are helping each other, within families, ethnic populations, support groups, neighborhoods and more.

However, the research also indicates many challenges. It identified five demographic groups as being most at risk of food insecurity: the elderly; disabled people; adolescents/young adults; parents/children; and Somali/Somali-Bantu residents, and found that poverty goes hand in hand with food insecurity, which goes hand in hand with health issues.

Among the most serious challenges identified were:

- Lack of access to *good food* because of geographic isolation, often due to a lack of, or limits to, transportation;
- Lack of affordable food and limited

choices for people using downtown stores;

- Cultural obstacles for obtaining appropriate food;
- Limited efficacy of government programs designed to provide healthy food. In some cases, the small size of benefits offers inadequate impact on daily nutrition needs of at-risk recipients;
- Lack of connectivity and collaboration between organizations working toward similar goals; and
- Lack of education about food preparation and selection, impacting healthy eating habits.

Additionally, the CFA found that challenges can be compounded to create complex, debilitating situations.

It is important to understand that these challenges, and others, do not exist in a vacuum. They exist in a complete food system, a complex web including economic, food tradition, health and environmental elements. Tackling these issues requires an understanding of the food system's many parts and an investment in long-term change.

Find the report

To access the full CFA report, and to learn more about the Good Food Council, visit www.goodfood4la.org. If you'd like a printed copy of the report please email goodfood4la@gmail.com.