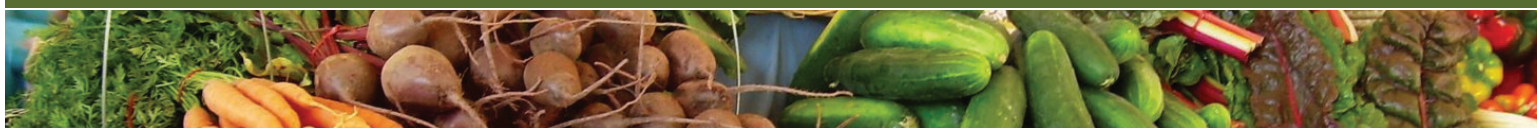


Voices Into Action



2014 HARNETT COUNTY COMMUNITY FOOD ASSESSMENT



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Voices into Action: The Families, Food, and Health Project (VIA) could not have carried out this work without the support and guidance of our partners and friends. This includes the members of Harnett Voices into Action: Empowering and Serving Harnett County Through the Families, Food, and Health Project, who provided guidance on what should be included in this assessment, and partners like students from the Masters of Science in Public Health Program at Campbell University and students at NC State University, who helped us to conduct surveys and interviews. Additionally, VIA community mentors Jody Currin, Mary Jane Bartlett, Dr. Frances Harrington, Tawanna Petty, and Dr. Lonnie Sessoms helped us to lead asset mapping workshops and design and conduct surveys and interviews with farmers and food pantry directors. We are grateful to Victory Tabernacle for hosting our asset-mapping workshops.

The authors of this report, Sarah Bowen, Annie Hardison-Moody, and Marissa Sheldon, also want to thank the VIA team at North Carolina State University and North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University for their assistance in collecting the information that we present here and editing this report.

Thank you, especially, to all of our community partners for your work in promoting access to healthy foods and places to be active in Harnett County, and to all of the people in Harnett County who shared your experiences with us. We could not have done any of this without you.

This project was supported by Agriculture and Food Research Initiative Competitive Grant no. 2011-68001-30103 from the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture.

INTRODUCTION

This assessment is part of Voices into Action: The Families, Food, and Health Project (VIA). Funded by the United States Department of Agriculture, Voices into Action is a partnership between NC State University, NC A&T State University, and NC Cooperative Extension. We draw on research and community partnerships in three counties (Lee, Harnett and Wake) to encourage and support projects and activities that impact food access and places to be active.

Community mentors, community partners, students at NC State and Campbell University, and Voices into Action researchers conducted this assessment of food resources in Harnett County between 2012 and 2014. By listening to community voices and mapping local food resources, we hope to better understand community priorities around food access. The results of this food assessment will inform our future work in Harnett County, as we build on community assets and the work of our partners in order to improve access to healthy and affordable food and places to be active.



Harnett County VIA Mentor, Jody Currin, with her produce at the Fuquay-Varina Farmers' Market.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Voices into Action: The Families, Food and Health Project (Voices into Action, or VIA) is a USDA-funded research and outreach project in three counties in North Carolina: Harnett, Lee and Wake. The project is a collaboration between North Carolina State University, NC A&T State University, and North Carolina Cooperative Extension. We partner with community organizations and residents in each of these counties to promote access to healthy foods and places to be active.



EFNEP Program Associate Debbie Stephenson leads a nutrition class at Martha's Place Food Pantry.

Our work starts with listening to the VOICES of community members. We interviewed 126 mothers and grandmothers across these three counties (44 in Harnett) to learn about the issues they face when feeding their families. Some of the key themes that emerged from these conversations included: 1) the prevalence and challenges of food insecurity; 2) the importance of reliable nutrition education and information, and 3) the need for safe places for kids to be active. In addition to hearing these voices, we conducted community workshops, where community organizations and Harnett

County residents came together to identify assets and priorities for action. Assets included faith communities, food pantries and the health department/WIC. Additionally, participants noted that it was important to work with faith communities and food pantries to ensure that Harnett County residents had access to healthy, safe and affordable foods.

Our work also expanded INTO the community, as we learned more about how organizations, individuals and programs in Harnett County were addressing some of these key themes and priorities identified through interviews and workshops. Working with community partners and students at both North Carolina State University and Campbell University, we interviewed 13 food pantry directors and eight farmers, and we surveyed faith communities, to learn what they were doing regarding food access and physical activity in their community. We found out that many congregations (59% across three counties) allowed residents and groups to use their facilities for physical activity. Facilities included gyms, classroom space, playgrounds and open areas. This information can be publicized in the community, to meet the needs for physical activity described by mothers, grandmothers, and in community workshops.

Additionally, all of the food pantry directors we surveyed indicated that they had experienced an increased demand for their services over the past year. More than half (56%) of these directors felt that they were not currently meeting the needs of their clients. Our community partners in Harnett County encouraged us to reach out to farmers in the area, to learn how to meet these needs through dona-

tions or gleaning and to find ways to expand opportunities to buy fresh produce from local farmers. Half of the farmers surveyed had excess produce on their farms. Some donated through informal networks (to churches and food pantries), but most were not aware of other ways of dealing with excess produce, like gleaning, which involves collecting leftover crops from fields after they have been commercially harvested.

Finally, this project aims to put research into ACTION, by partnering with community organizations, carrying out nutrition education programs, cultivating community-based action groups, and funding innovative mini-grant projects that provide sustainable solutions to the issues addressed by community residents and partners. In partnership with the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP), we held four Faithful Families Eating Smart and Moving More classes (three in Southeast Raleigh, one in Harnett County) and five EFNEP classes (three in Harnett County, two in Southeast Raleigh) in 2013. According to food pantry directors, nutrition education was the top resource they wanted to provide their clients to promote health. To support this, three of these EFNEP classes were held in food pantries. Among the 61 participants in all of the food pantry classes, 100% showed a positive change in consumption of at least one food group (fruits, vegetables, whole grains, protein, dairy) after the final session.

Our work continues through Harnett County's community-based action group, which was created in 2012, following the community workshops referenced above. This group is comprised of diverse stakeholders, and they

have carried out or supported projects like nutrition education classes at food pantries, community listening sessions, and community gardens. This group also advises and reviews mini-grant projects. To date, VIA has awarded nine community-based projects across western Harnett County. These include walking trails at a Shawtown church, fitness classes and healthy eating policies at an after-school site, community gardens in Shawtown churches, a mobile produce market, and a community garden at Campbell University.

By listening to community residents, we aim to continue to hear and build upon the VOICES of the people of Harnett County. Their priorities are clear:

- address food insecurity through partnerships with food pantries and farmers;
- help people learn more about and make it easier to cook and prepare healthy foods;
- build on community assets, develop community trust, and create sustainable changes that promote healthy, affordable foods and physical activity.

Through partnerships, Harnett County's community-based action group, and our mini-grants, we will continue to put these priorities INTO ACTION in the coming years. To learn more about the continued work of Voices into Action and our community partners, visit www.voicesintoaction.org.

VOICES

We were very intentional about the name of this project – Voices into Action. The first word of our name implies the essential first step in any community-based project: listening to, hearing, and being attentive to the many voices that make up a community.

We began our work by listening to the voices of mothers and grandmothers of young children in Harnett County. They told us about their experiences feeding their families in challenging times. We heard about raising children, and the difficulties and joys of parenting. We also heard their visions and thoughts about their communities: what their neighborhoods were like, where their children played, and what they would change in their community if given the chance. We spent a good deal of time in the homes of several of these families, learning more about how they cooked and ate together, going shopping with them, and even visiting the doctor's office or Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program appointments.

In addition to talking with these mothers and grandmothers, our efforts to hear community voices extended to organizations and residents in Harnett County. We carried out several community workshops, to learn about how organizations and residents prioritized the issues around access to food and places to be active. We also asked them to talk about the organizations and programs doing the best work in Harnett County. The goals identified at these workshops set the stage for the work we continue today.

As we listened to the voices of the people of Harnett County, several key themes emerged:

- ▶ Food security: Many community members talked about their need for accessible, affordable food. People relied on food pantries and other emergency food providers to make ends meet, making these organizations crucial in Harnett County.
- ▶ Healthy eating: People emphasized the need for reliable, consistent nutrition information.
- ▶ Places for kids to be active: Parents and grandparents wanted their kids to be active and happy, but told us that there were not a lot of public spaces where kids could play, especially in western Harnett County.
- ▶ Faith communities: Community members and partners talked about the importance of faith communities, particularly during tough times. They wondered how to get congregations working together to improve access to healthy foods and places to be active.

We believe that good community work begins by listening, and we hope that you learn from the voices in the following pages.

VOICES OF FAMILIES IN HARNETT COUNTY

One of our goals with this project was to give mothers and grandmothers the opportunity to voice their experiences feeding their families. In 2012 and 2013, we interviewed 44 mothers and grandmothers, with children ages 2-8, who lived in western Harnett County. The women who invited us into their homes told us what they ate, where they bought their food, how they prepared it, and what they thought about their communities. Some of the key issues that they discussed included food security, healthy eating, and the importance of health and happiness for children.

Food Security:

According to a recent Feeding America Report, almost 19% of Harnett County families are food insecure, which means that they do not have enough safe, nutritious food to live an active lifestyle.¹ Among the families that we talked to, the percentage was much higher; 53% of households were food insecure. Many families (77%) received SNAP benefits, which they said were a crucial food resource, but families still struggled to put food on the table. Mothers and grandmothers talked about the high cost of healthy foods. They noted that fast food and junk food were often cheaper than healthier alternatives. Others discussed the lack of affordable, fresh produce. One way that some families got fresh produce was by growing it themselves, either in their own gardens or at community gardens. Thirty percent of the people we interviewed said they gardened.

In addition to the challenge of making scarce food resources stretch, for some families, a lack of reliable transportation and the rising cost

of gas were also important barriers to having enough food. Eleven percent of families did not have a car, and had to either rely on friends or relatives for rides to the grocery store or pay for cabs. Even among those who did have a car, some people said that the healthiest options were far from their houses, and that the high cost of gas made it hard for them to get the food they needed.

Healthy Eating:

Many mothers said that they were interested in learning ways to eat healthier on a budget. Some of them talked about receiving helpful advice from doctors and nutrition educators, including at the Health Department, where some mothers went for their WIC appointments. For example, some mothers had learned when to buy lower- versus higher-fat milk, depending on their children's ages. Others said that they tried to eat a variety of food (like fruits, vegetables, grains and proteins). However, some mothers and grandmothers said that they felt that the advice they got from doctors and nutrition educators was unrealistic. Several mentioned that whole-grain rice and whole wheat bread, in particular, just were not as tasty to their families. Furthermore, some mothers expressed frustration that the information they saw, heard, or read was inconsistent, creating confusion instead of solving problems. They wondered: Is it better to eat three meals per day, or six small ones? Is not eating the best way to lose weight? Is meat a necessary source of daily protein? In the

"If you're on a budget like me with food stamps, and they charge by the pound, it's hard to figure out how much this is going to cost and how much this is going to cost, so instead of buying those fresh fruits I just go get a bag because I know how much that bag is going to cost."

~ Harnett County mother

¹ Feeding America. Map the Meal Gap 2013. Available from http://feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/hunger-studies/map-the-meal-gap/~/_/media/Files/a-map-2011/NC_AllCountiesMMG_2011.ashx?.pdf.

“I taught them to climb trees, I taught them how to swim, teaching them how to fish, how to plant flowers, how to make a garden, something that’s getting them involved and not just being a couch potato.”

~ Harnett County mother

midst of so much conflicting information, some mothers took matters into their own hands and did their own independent research, using the internet or turning to trusted friends and neighbors.

People told us that their lack of time got in the way of healthy eating. Many mothers preferred to cook meals from scratch, when they had the

time and ingredients necessary, because they said that this allowed them to have more control over what their families were eating. But they told us that they often did not have the time to plan and shop for meals, prepare foods the night before, or try new cooking methods. In addition, some perceived eating out as a quick, tasty, and sometimes cheap option to feed their families on particularly busy days.

Despite the challenges, some of the mothers we talked to told us that they had changed their cooking practices because they were concerned about the health problems that close friends and relatives had experienced. They saw loved ones struggling with diabetes, heart problems, and weight-related health issues, and they tried to offer support and make small changes. Mothers described switching to olive oil while cooking, reducing the amount of salt in common dishes, and baking instead of frying.

Overall, the mothers and grandmothers we interviewed were eager for more consistent and practical information about living healthy lifestyles. Some found this through nutrition

education classes through the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP); however, others expressed frustration when they were not able to access reliable information about healthy eating.

Children’s Health and Happiness:

Mothers and grandmothers expressed concern over children doing too many “still” activities, like watching TV, texting, talking on a cell phone, or using a tablet or computer. Many mothers said that although they allowed their kids to do some of these activities, they tried to limit them. Most encouraged their kids to get active by playing outside. Some also required their kids to take responsibility for some household chores.

Overall, mothers and grandmothers wanted their children to be happy and healthy, and they felt a great deal of responsibility for making this happen. Many identified life lessons that centered on food, and they sought to provide their children with choices in their eating.

“The boys are just learning about the whole life cycle of the fruit and vegetables, and actually my son Leroy is planting his own carrots... I’m hoping maybe this summer -- it just depends on how if things work out, to let them have like a little piece of land and actually plant a few things. So we’ll see. Because I miss having the farm.”

~ Harnett County mother

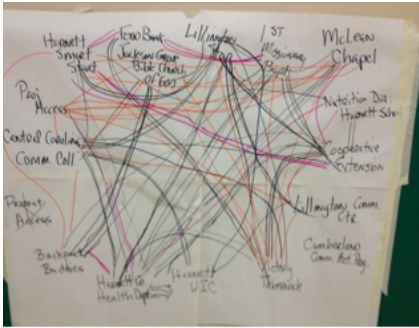
Although they had often been told to “clean their plates” growing up, many said that they thought kids should be allowed to stop eating when they are full. They believed this was part of a balanced and healthy lifestyle. Many mothers limited snacking, as well as consumption of sweets and soda, for the same reason.

In general, mothers and grandmothers in western Harnett County told us how important it was for them to have enough healthy,

affordable food to feed their families. They wanted to learn how to cook healthier foods, even though they felt confused about where to turn for help with this. They cared deeply about their children and wanted them to be happy. To the people we talked to, this meant ensuring that they have places to play and choices in the healthy foods they eat. Our next section on community voices echoes some of these themes.



COMMUNITY VOICES DRIVING COMMUNITY CHANGE



organizational representatives
show the connections between
their groups

Building on what we had learned from mothers and grandmothers, we conducted workshops with community organizations and residents in Harnett County. We held workshops on March 16 and 17, 2012, at Victory Tabernacle Church in western Harnett County. We held another workshop on May 20, 2012, at Golden Adventurers Senior Center, also in western Harnett County. The workshops

focused on identifying community assets and priorities related to access to healthy foods and places to be active in Harnett County.

For the first workshop, we brought together representatives from governmental organizations,

nonprofits, and faith communities in Harnett County. The following day, Harnett County residents came to the table to share their insights. The two groups worked together in the afternoon of the second day, talking about how to move forward, given the assets and priorities identified by both groups. A few months later, we held another workshop in western Harnett County, to include the voices of additional community residents.

During each workshop, we asked people to identify the organizations and programs that they thought were doing the best work in Harnett County. Here are their results:

Table 1: Exemplary Organizations

Organizational Representatives	Community Residents (first workshop)	Community Residents (second workshop)
WIC/Health Department	Faith Communities	Martha's Place Food Pantry
Cooperative Extension	Schools	Schools
Parks and Recreation	Food Banks/Pantries	Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts
Schools	Parks	Backpack Buddies
Food Banks/Pantries	WIC/Health Department	Churches
		Day Care Centers
		Parks
		WIC/Health Department

We asked the people who came to the first workshop to tell us why these organizations and programs were important.

They gave the following responses, ordered by the most common answers:

Table 2: Reasons Organizations Are Exemplary

Organizational Representatives	Community Residents
1. Provide fitness classes and sports	1. Supply free, nutritious food
2. Offer nutrition/healthy eating classes	2. Offer education about nutrition and health
3. Help with the cost of food (SNAP, WIC)	3. Provide spiritual growth or support
4. Create and maintain community gardens	4. Offer places to be active
5. Develop and use healthy drink and eating policies	5. Provide activities and exercise
	6. Offer information and referrals

As shown in Table 1 and 2, every group named food pantries and food banks, as well as the Health Department and WIC office, as some of Harnett County's most important resources. They told us that these organizations helped with food costs and provided access to nutritious foods. Additionally, all three groups named faith communities as important. They told us that faith communities provided both vital services and spiritual support for the people of Harnett County.

Drawing on the assets identified above, the group from the first workshop identified the following priorities for future action:

- Food Pantries – The groups talked about the need to connect food pantries with healthy foods. Additionally, the groups noted that there needed to be more community education about the locations and hours of places where citizens can access emergency foods.
- Faith Communities – The groups emphasized that faith communities were vital assets, but that they were not working together. Participants emphasized that area faith communities should partner to bring about sustainable changes to support healthy eating and activity.

At the second workshop, community members said there was a need for more parks in western Harnett County, including near Johnsonville. They noted that many of the existing parks and playgrounds were too far away for many residents to access. In terms of moving forward, this group wanted to focus on:

- Communication – Participants emphasized that people often did not know about

events or programs in their community, and wondered how organizations could get the word out.

- Safety – People noted that safety was an issue for families who wanted to be physically active, and expressed concerns about drugs and drug use in the area.
- Voice – Residents said that they felt that this part of the county was not heard by their representatives. They said they often felt ignored by the county at large, and wanted to express their thoughts and needs to elected officials.

“Not only do they give you food, they don't make you feel bad about coming, they make you feel better about being better.”

“When you leave some of these places, you feel better than you did when you came in.”

~ Community residents reflect on why faith communities are important

Finally, after each workshop, we asked participants to commit to making one concrete change after attending the workshop. They took on this charge, and told us about the following changes:

- The Second Harvest Food Bank of Southeast NC set up a Mobile Pantry Distribution at Victory Tabernacle Church.
- Several pastors expressed interest in starting community gardens at their churches.
- A community member committed to setting up a walking group in her neighborhood.

In the next section, we discuss some of the additional assessments we carried out, to learn how to put these VOICES INTO ACTION in Harnett County.

“You are your brother's keeper. If we pull together, we can get something done.”

~Community resident

INTO

After hearing the voices of the people in Harnett County, we partnered with community organizations to address several strategic priorities, including:

- Learning how to get healthy foods, particularly produce, to families that needed it most;
- Finding out what food pantries were doing to meet the needs of food insecure families;
- Determining how faith communities could provide spaces for families to be more active; and
- Tracking the foods that were available in corner and convenience stores.

To answer these questions, we carried out several surveys and interviews, with faith communities, food pantries, and farmers, and at corner or convenience stores. Before taking action, we needed to have a better sense of the scope of the issues facing Harnett County and the assets that were already there. What resources did people have? How did community groups and organizations meet the needs of the families they served? What additional support did these exemplary programs and organizations need? How could we build bridges and partnerships? This work is the INTO part of Voices into Action.

Participants in the EFNEP classes at Martha's Place food pantry enjoying some exercise.



MOVING MORE IN COMMUNITIES OF FAITH: FACILITY USE AGREEMENTS

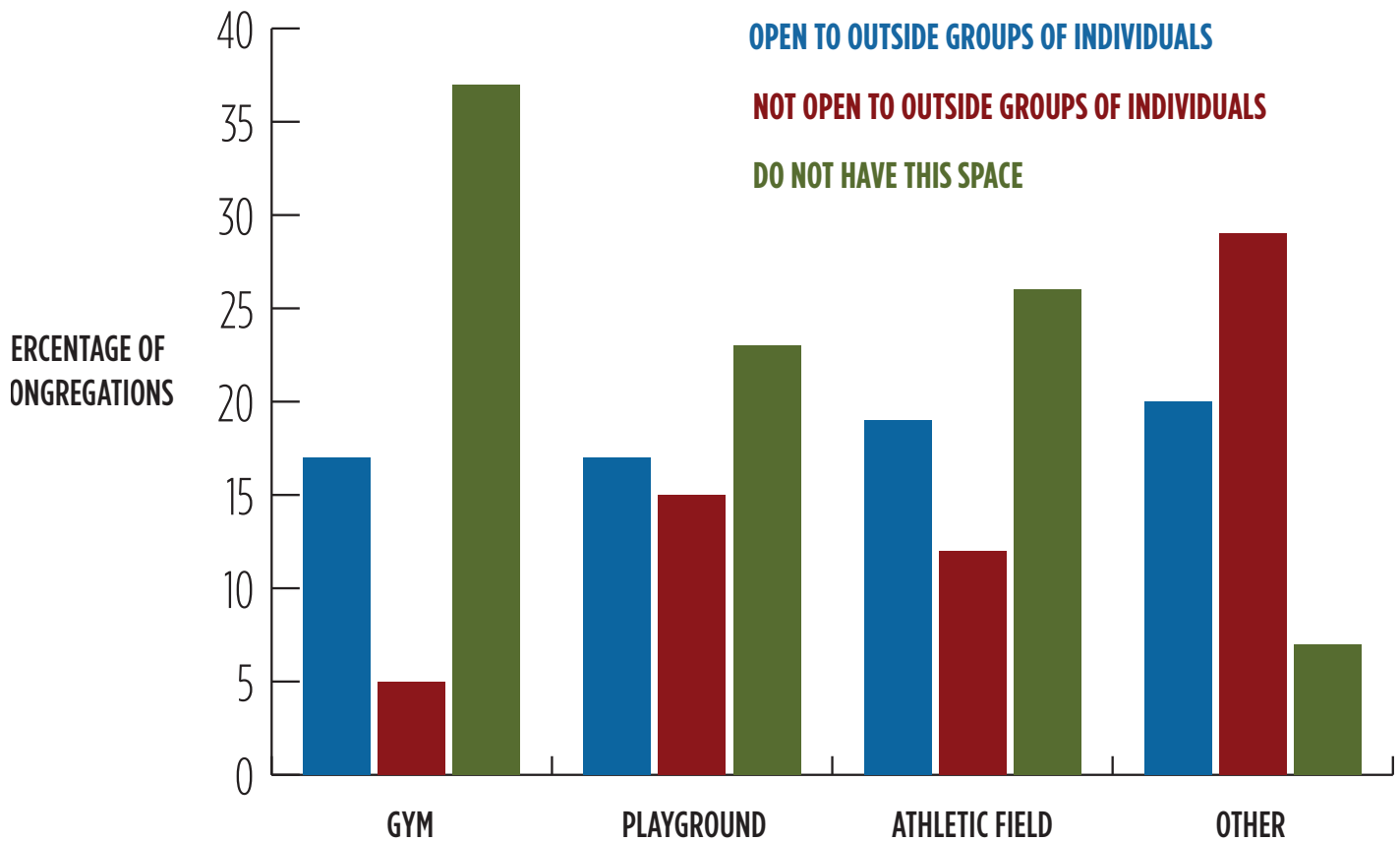
In our workshops and our interviews, many people told us about the need for safe spaces for kids to be active. At the asset mapping workshops, people talked about partnering with faith communities to make these kinds of spaces available to children and their families. Therefore, in 2013, we set out to learn more about what faith communities were already doing to promote physical activity. We knew that some congregations, like First Baptist Church of Sanford, had large gyms they opened up to the community for exercise and group classes. We also knew that other congregations,

like Mount Peace Baptist Church in Southeast Raleigh, used their parking lots for walking groups after worship services.

We partnered with the Community Transformation Grant Program (CTG), the North Carolina Council of Churches Partners in Health and Wholeness Program, and Faithful Families Eating Smart and Moving More to carry out a brief survey with faith communities in Southeast Raleigh, Lee and Harnett Counties. Working with the Health Department in each county, we developed a list of 230

Figure 1

FACILITY USAGE IN FAITH COMMUNITIES





Zumba class at First Baptist Church in Sanford.

congregations. We developed both an online and paper version of the survey.

In total, we received 66 surveys, for a response rate of 29%. We received 18 surveys (27%) from Harnett County, 22 surveys (33%) from Lee County, and 20 surveys (30%) from Southeast Raleigh. Ten percent of respondents did not identify their county.

We learned that 59% of faith communities allowed outside groups or individuals to use their facilities for physical activity. As shown in Figure 1, facilities included gyms, playgrounds, and athletic spaces. Some of the other facilities that faith communities listed as open to groups or individuals included Fellowship Hall, basement spaces, multi-purpose rooms, indoor walking tracks, picnic shelters, and parking lots. Most congregations had a mix of formal and informal policies allowing usage of the spaces.

For the congregations that did not allow outside groups to use their space, we asked them to explain why. The top two reasons given were a lack of space and concerns about the cost of maintaining the spaces. Liability concerns, or worries about lawsuits and insurance, ranked third. Some congregations reported that they had not been asked about use of their space or that they did not know where to begin the process.

We were excited to see that among the congregations that did open their spaces up to outside groups or individuals, 45% said that they were willing to share their information with the community. Each county is creating a resource guide with this information, through the community-based action groups. These will be available on the Voices into Action website as soon as they are completed (www.voicesintoaction.org).

We are partnering with the CTG Project, North Carolina Council of Churches, and Faithful Families to create tools and trainings for faith communities that want to open up their spaces for physical activity usage. The results of this survey will help us address the key concerns for faith communities when opening up their spaces to kids and their families for physical activity.

RESPONDING TO FOOD INSECURITY: CONVERSATIONS WITH FOOD PANTRY DIRECTORS

In our interviews and asset-mapping workshops, many people identified food pantries as an important resource in Harnett County. We surveyed the pantries in Harnett County, so that we could learn more about what they were doing and the services they provided, and how we, along with our partners, could best support them.

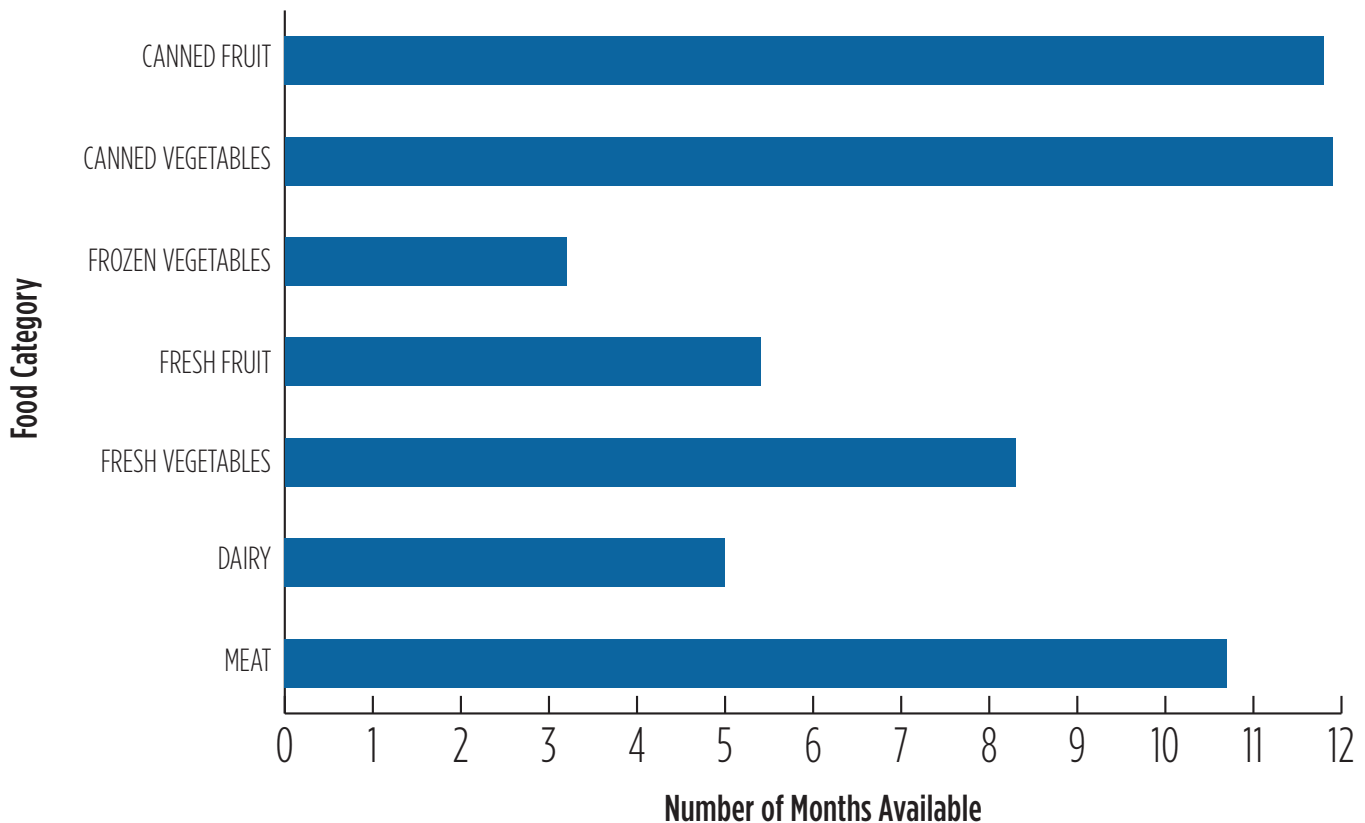
We identified 13 food pantries in Harnett County, and completed interviews with nine pantry directors in 2013 and 2014. These directors gave us a great deal of insight into their perspectives as providers, as well as the needs that they saw among their clients.

The food pantries varied widely in size; one served less than 50 clients per month, while another provided food for more than 2000 clients per month. The median number of clients served per month at each food pantry was 500.

One of the most telling things we learned from pantry directors was how hard things had gotten for them in recent years. One hundred percent of directors said that the demand for their services had increased in the past year. More than half (56%) indicated that they felt that they were falling short of meeting their clients' needs, and two pantries reported that they had turned clients away at least once due to a lack of food.

Figure 2

AVAILABILITY OF FOOD AT FOOD PANTRIES IN HARNETT COUNTY



Pantries relied on donations and purchased food to get food for their clients. On average, 44% of the food pantries' supply was donated, with the rest being purchased by the food pantry. One pantry we surveyed, however, received only 5% of their food in donations and had to use their own funds to buy almost all of their food. Directors told us that the foods they needed most were non-perishable items and fresh fruits and vegetables.

The pantry directors worked hard to provide their clients with a variety of foods, but struggled to provide frozen vegetables, fresh fruit, and dairy products. On average, directors said that they provided canned fruits and vegetables every month throughout the year, meat almost 11 months out of the year, and fresh vegetables eight months out of the year. Frozen vegetables, on the other hand, were hardly ever available to clients, and fresh fruits and dairy

NC State student talking with representative from the Harnett County Food Pantry



A Sample of Food Pantry Missions

"To offset food cost by providing enough food for a couple of days, therefore freeing up money for other bills."

"Feeding mind, body, and spirit; eliminating hunger."

"Feed all people that really need food."

products were available less than half of the time. Pantries' lack of freezer and refrigeration space limited their ability to store perishable items like dairy products.

Finally, we asked the food pantry directors what additional services they would like to be able to offer. The overwhelming majority of pantry directors said they would like to offer nutrition education to their clients. The Harnett County community-based action group is using this information to continue our work with the food pantry directors, by piloting nutrition education classes and partnering with farmers to learn about how to get more fresh produce into pantries.

WHO GROWS OUR FOOD?: SURVEYING HARNETT COUNTY FARMERS

Many people talked about the importance of farming and gardening. Given the county's vast agricultural resources, our community partners and mentors encouraged us to talk with local farmers, to learn how we could work with them to address food access issues. With input from our community mentors, we developed a survey of fruit and vegetable farmers and livestock producers in Harnett County. These surveys were conducted by our Voices into Action community mentors, including Renee Hein, Mary Jane Bartlett, and Jody Currin, as well as by Voices into Action staff, graduate assistants, and community partners. We began conducting surveys in Fall 2013. We have interviewed eight farmers to date, and we are currently reaching out to include more farmers through a mail survey.

Of the eight farmers surveyed, only three considered farming to be their primary occupation. For the majority of households, most of their household income came from other sources. Farmers grew a wide range of crops, including various fruits (strawberries, apples, peaches, watermelon), several types of vegetables (tomatoes, greens, cucumbers, beans, peppers, carrots, corn), wheat, oats, and pecans. Four also raised livestock (chickens, turkeys, goats, pigs, cows) for eggs and meat.

All of the farmers said they thought that agriculture in Harnett County was either "doing ok" or "struggling" (versus "thriving" or "doing well"). Several told us that they thought smaller farms faced particular challenges and needed more assistance and support around marketing and selling local produce. Farmers told us that their biggest concerns were the high costs associated with production and the

lack of markets where they could sell their produce.

The farmers that we surveyed sold their produce through various outlets: at their farm or a roadside stand, at farmers' markets, through a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program, or to friends and family members. Only one of the farmers, who sold at a farmers' market, accepted EBT/ SNAP (food stamps) as payment, and only one accepted WIC and Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program vouchers. Farmers told us that they did not have enough information about how to start the process of accepting these forms of payment.

Half of the farmers reported having excess produce or meat on their farm. Of these four farmers, two donated to food pantries and elderly housing facilities, one canned and sold the excess produce, and one livestock farmer with excess meat froze it and gave it to friends or family. None of the farmers had considered allowing gleaning on their farm.

Harnett County farmers are an important resource in this community. We hope to continue to work with these farmers to increase their visibility in the community and to also help increase community members' access to healthy, local foods.

"I do 99% of the work. [I have] no labor help because of lack of finances."

"[People in this county] only eat the cheapest food."

"[There is too much] distance to viable markets out of county and distance to USDA-inspected meat processors."

"[We need a] source for selling produce."

~ Harnett County farmers, discussing the challenges of farming in Harnett County

WHERE DO WE BUY OUR FOOD?: CORNER STORE ASSESSMENTS

In addition to connecting farmers and food pantries, the people we spoke to wanted to learn more about the types of foods available in local stores in Harnett County. Students from the “From Harvest to Health: Religion,

Table 1:
Availability
of Fresh Fruits

Convenience Stores (n=39)	
Bananas	33%
Apples	28%
Grapes	3%
Strawberries	3%

Culture and Food” course in the Masters in Science in Public Health Program at Campbell University carried out corner store assessments at 39 stores in Harnett County. We defined a corner store as a convenience store or gas station that sells food.

We began by mapping out all of the stores in the county, working with community residents to update and correct the maps. After that, students used the Yale Rudd Center’s adapted version of the Nutrition Environment Mea-

surement Survey (NEMS) to assess the types of foods available for sale in these stores and to compare prices.

Fresh vegetables were not available for sale in any of the stores; however, some fruits were available (see Table 1).

Bananas, on average, cost \$.87 per piece and apples, on average, cost \$1.07 per piece. In addition to fresh fruits, canned corn and green beans were available in almost one-third of the stores.

	Availability (n=39)	Price (n=39)
Canned corn (15.5 oz.)	28%	\$1.81
Canned green beans (15.5 oz.)	28%	\$2.10

We also assessed the availability of milk and bread, finding that while many stores offered both whole wheat bread and white bread, low-fat milk (1% or skim) was almost never available (see Table 2).

Table 2:
Availability and Price
of Bread and Milk

	Availability	Price
White bread (loaf)	20%	\$2.27
Wheat bread (loaf)	20%	\$2.19
Low-fat milk (0.5 gal)	3%	\$3.99
Whole milk	56%	\$3.63

ACTION

Our work is carried out *in* communities and *by* communities. In this section, we explore the ways that Harnett County residents and organizations are putting their voices into action, by increasing access to healthy foods and places to be active in their communities.

We began our work by talking to key stakeholders in Harnett County, including Cooperative Extension, faith communities, day care centers, the Partnership for Children, low-income housing developments, the Health Department, and food pantries. We had individual meetings with the leaders of each of these organizations in order to learn more about the community from their perspectives.

Harnett County is separated rather distinctly by the Cape Fear River; on the southwest side of the river is very rural, while the northeast side of the river is more developed and suburban. Based on conversations with community stakeholders and during community workshops, we decided to focus on the area that we loosely deemed “western Harnett County” (the area southwest of the river), since residents and community organizations felt that this area had been neglected by other initiatives.



Working with our community partners, so far, we have focused on several concrete strategies:

1. Nutrition Education Classes through the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP): The mothers and grandmothers we interviewed mentioned the importance of having consistent information about healthy eating. Food pantry directors indicated that they wanted to offer educational opportunities for their clients. To meet these needs, we are working with NC EFNEP to carry out healthy eating classes in food pantries, churches, and community organizations.
2. Community-Based Action Groups: After the workshops that we held in 2012, we invited all participants to join a community group that would begin working on the strategic priorities identified in the sessions. This group, Harnett Voices into Action: Empowering Communities Through the Families, Food, and Health Project, is still running today. It forms the backbone of the community-based work that we do. This group sets the priorities for action, helps to review and revise mini-grants, and develops partnerships to carry out effective projects in the county.
3. Mini-Grants: We have funded mini-grant projects that support the VIA mission and the priorities identified by mothers, residents, and county organizations. These projects vary in scope, and have included community gardens, walking trails, kids' exercise programs, and nutrition education.

PROMOTING HEALTHY EATING THROUGH EDUCATION: OUR PARTNERSHIP WITH EFNEP

In our community workshops, conversations with mothers and grandmothers, and interviews with food pantry directors, we learned that nutrition education was important to many people in Harnett County. We have partnered with the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) to offer nutrition education in various community settings, including food pantries, faith communities, and non-profit or community organizations. We have also partnered with the Faithful Families Eating Smart and Moving More Program (Faithful Families) to carry out faith-based nutrition and physical activity programs.



EFNEP
EXPANDED FOOD AND NUTRITION
EDUCATION PROGRAM

Our EFNEP and Faithful Families partners at North Carolina Cooperative Extension worked with us

to provide four Faithful Families classes (three in Southeast Raleigh, one in Harnett) and five EFNEP classes (three in Harnett County, two in Southeast Raleigh) in 2013. These EFNEP classes were held in many community settings in Harnett County, including an after-school program and food pantry. In 2013, 61 people participated in these classes, across both counties. When we consider all of the members of the participants' households, this means that 196 people in total were affected.

EFNEP and Faithful Families classes help participants to learn how to shop for, prepare, budget for and serve healthier meals. Participants also learn about the benefits of daily physical activity, including easy ways to get more activity in during their busy lives. Each class includes a recipe and food demonstration,

so participants are able to taste these healthy foods. Additionally, Faithful Families classes encourage participants to look at the congregation as a whole, and to think about how the faith community can make eating smart and moving more the easier choice in their places of worship. They do this by adopting healthy eating or physical activity policies, creating gardens or walking trails, and starting walking or exercise groups.

Participants in these classes reported important changes in their nutrition behaviors and practices. Across all nine classes:

- 100% of participants showed a positive change in healthy eating behaviors in at least one food group (fruits, vegetables, grains, protein, or dairy).
- 65% of participants increased the number of servings of vegetables that they consumed.
- Participants reported an average cost savings of \$134.00/month on their food bills.
- 56% of participants showed improvement in shopping with a grocery list.
- 60% reported an improvement in using nutrition facts to make food choices.
- 86% of participants showed improvements in one or more food resource management practices (avoiding running out of food at the end of the month, using a grocery list, or planning meals).
- 88% of participants showed improvement in one or more nutrition practices (preparing food without adding salt, reading nutrition labels, or eating breakfast).

Three of these nine classes were held at food pantries, because we heard from food pantry directors that offering nutrition education classes was one of their priorities. Of the 66 participants mentioned above, 11 completed classes in food pantries.

Here are some results from the subset of food pantry classes:

- 73% (8 of 11) of participants reported improvements in shopping with a grocery list.
- 73% (8 of 11) of participants reported improvement in no longer running out of food at the end of the month.
- 100% of participants showed improvements in one or more food resource management practices (avoiding running out of food at the end of the month, using a grocery list, or planning meals).
- 82% of participants showed improvement in one or more nutrition practices (preparing food without adding salt, reading nutrition labels, or eating breakfast).
- 100% of participants showed a positive change in at least one food group at exit (fruits, vegetables, grains, protein, or dairy).

In all of these classes, we worked with our partners at Cooperative Extension to tailor classes to each unique setting. For example, classes at one Harnett County food pantry incorporated fresh fruits and vegetables from the pantry's on-site community garden. Participants were able to taste delicious, local foods each week, as the nutrition educator adapted recipes to

include ingredients like lima beans, tomatoes, and cucumbers. One of the faith communities where we worked invited participants to come thirty minutes early, to exercise together



using materials and DVDs purchased through a Voices into Action mini-grant. Additionally, thanks to a grant EFNEP received from Food Lion, all food pantry classes included a grocery store tour, so participants could practice the skills they learned in class, like reading nutrition labels and unit pricing.

As we continue this partnership in 2014, we are looking forward to new opportunities for nutrition education. These include youth programs in after-school settings, additional partnerships with faith communities and food pantries, and connecting with Latino congregations with the Faithful Families program.

EFNEP Program Associate Debbie Stephenson leads a grocery store tour to help people learn to shop for healthier foods.

COMMUNITY-BASED ACTION: BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS AND PUTTING PLANS INTO ACTION

After the asset-mapping workshops that we held in 2012, we invited interested Harnett County residents and community organizations to join a working group to identify key priorities and to discuss the next steps. The goal for this group was to build on the assets identified during the workshops in order to create programs, policies, and sustainable changes to improve access to healthy foods and places to be active, with a particular focus on western Harnett County.

Building Partnerships

One of the first tasks for the group, which voted on the name Harnett Voices into Action: Empowering and Serving Harnett County Through the Families, Food, and Health Project (Harnett VIA), was to develop goals for the coming years, shown in the figure below.

Harnett VIA Goals

Putting resources in the hands of the community; increasing knowledge about existing resources relating to food access and access to physical activity space.	Increasing access to healthy and affordable foods.
Increasing access to food and reducing hunger.	Increasing education and knowledge about healthy living.

Putting Plans Into Action

Within these goals, Harnett VIA identified long-term desired outcomes for the community and the strategies to reach those outcomes:

Support local organizations and community groups that promote healthy lifestyles.

Connect food pantries to gardens and local growers.

Educate on how to be physically active and how to incorporate physical activity into daily life.

Expand use of existing programs that are known to be effective in the community.

Partner with gardening and farming resources. Identify organizations or groups interested in hosting classes or starting gardens.

People in Harnett County know how to shop for and actively choose healthy options.
Food pantries increase the amount of healthy food available for clients.
Safe places to be active exist and are accessible in each community in Western Harnett County.
Rates of obesity and related chronic diseases decrease in Harnett County.
Increased numbers of residents grow their own food.
People in Harnett County are aware of health-related resources available in the community.

The following action items are currently in progress:

- **Focusing on Shawtown:** The group held listening sessions in Shawtown, where they heard about residents' interest in community gardens. The Harnett VIA Shawtown Subcommittee was awarded a VIA mini-grant to start a garden in this community.
- **Partnering with faith communities:** Several congregations are participating in the Shawtown garden, referenced above. Additionally, Lillington Star Free Will Baptist Church was awarded a VIA mini-grant in 2013, to implement Faithful Families classes and create an exercise space. One additional Faithful Families program was started with a Spanish-speaking congregation in the county.
- **Hosting a food pantry directors' collaborative:** This group aims to help all food pantries to increase their reach and meet the demands of the food insecure population within the community.
- **Promoting the Summer Food Service Program:** Harnett VIA has been hard at work publicizing grant opportunities for school breakfast and lunch programs within Harnett County elementary schools and community groups in order to improve the health of children in the county.

One of the greatest accomplishments in Harnett County thus far has been piloting two EFNEP classes at Martha's Place Food Pantry (now 5N2 Food Pantry). One hundred percent of participants in these classes noted a positive change in their eating habits as a result. As described previously, many food pantries

throughout Harnett County reported an interest in providing more nutrition education services to their clients. Implementing EFNEP classes at food pantries is a model that we hope to continue throughout Harnett County, as it is an ideal way to reach out to individuals in the community who otherwise would not have access to such educational resources.

One of the major goals of Harnett VIA has been communicating with community residents, and as such, they sought to develop a resource guide that would put valuable information about food pantries, farmers' markets, and places to be active in the hands of the people who need it most. As noted in the previous INTO section of this assessment, this resource guide is currently being drafted, and will be available by the summer of 2014.

Harnett VIA is a group of passionate community partners. We are excited to continue to work with this group in the future, to build on successes and develop new visions for the Harnett County community moving forward.



Campbell University students work in the garden.

COMMUNITIES IN ACTION: VIA MINI-GRANTS

In order to facilitate community-led action, in 2013 and 2014, we awarded mini-grants to Harnett County organizations with creative proposals for improving access to healthy and affordable food and places to be active in their communities. Our goal was that these mini-grant projects would serve as springboards for long-lasting, sustainable changes.

The main criteria for the grants, which were developed in partnership with community stakeholders, were that each project must:

- Include a policy and/or environmental change;
- Improve access to healthy foods and/or safe places to be active;
- Involve work with partners; and
- Include a plan for long-term sustainability.

The maximum budget for a grant was \$2,000, with some exceptions made depending on the scope of the proposed project.

“We learned it doesn’t take much to exercise and get fit. Some foods that you think don’t taste good, actually [are] good...Now when we have meals at church, we offer alternatives to fried foods, and [we provide] water instead of only sweet tea and lemonade. Getting children involved helps to motivate the parents to exercise and eat healthier.”

~ Lillington Star project leader

“First Step Initiative provided service to 45 youth and adults. ...Families benefited tremendously from learning accurate food, nutrition, [and] fitness information. ...We were also instrumental in helping 75% of the families served to change their eating habits and increase their weekly physical activity.”

~Think Smart Outreach project leader

Our first round of mini-grants was awarded in May 2013, after being reviewed by Voices into Action staff, community mentors, and members of Harnett VIA, as well as by the USDA. The following organizations and individuals were awarded mini-grants:

- **Campbell University**, to support a community garden that then donated its produce to a local food pantry;
- **Lillington Star Free Will Baptist Church (FWBC)**, to support physical activity through making exercise equipment, fitness-based video games, exercise classes, and a walking trail available to the public, and to offer Faithful Families Eating Smart and Moving More classes;
- **Think Smart Outreach Center**, a child-care and after-school center, to provide EFNEP and Zumba classes for parents of students at the center; and
- **A local farmer**, to support her mobile produce market initiative (Jacob’s Mobile Market), which also donated produce to families in need.

Despite minor setbacks that could not have been anticipated (for example, the heavy rains that damaged some garden crops), the mini-grants were very successful:

- **Campbell University:** More than 80 volunteers helped with various gardening tasks at Campbell University's Mustard Seed Garden, and the donations to the Harnett Food Pantry served 45 adults and 42 children.
- **Lillington Star FWBC:** 10 adults and 2 children participated in Faithful Families classes, and 30 adults and 30 children took part in the exercise classes.
- **Think Smart Outreach Center:** Think Smart's EFNEP and Zumba classes served 45 individuals.
- **Jacob's Mobile Market:** The mobile market donated 15-20 pounds of produce each week to approximately 25 senior citizens living in a local housing complex.

"In the busy world we live in, children are not shown the beauty of the outdoors. They are not learning to stop and smell the flowers and they are not experiencing the pleasures of eating fresh vegetables. I am excited to bring nature back into the classroom. Giving the children the experience of growing savory and delicious vegetables and watching colorful flowers grow. This learning experience will put smiles on their faces teaching them about healthy foods and fresh air. They will be proud to say they grew it!"

~ Wonder Years project leader

Jacob's Mobile Market.



Think Smart participants engage in an outdoor dance fitness session.



A second round of mini-grants was awarded in 2014, this time to five organizations in Harnett County:

- **Lillington Star Free Will Baptist Church**, to provide a play area for youth in the community;
- **Shawtown community residents**, to create a community garden for Lillington First Baptist church and Shawtown community members;
- **Harnett County Partnership for Children**, to provide a nutrition assessment and nutrition education curriculum for ten child care centers;
- **Wonder Years Preschool**, to create a school garden run by staff and Future Farmers of America (FFA) students to teach children about gardening and healthy eating; and
- **Excel Outreach Center**, to provide monthly physical activity classes for youth, and to create a vegetable garden for children and their parents to learn about growing, preparing, and eating fresh produce.

Working with Harnett VIA, our goal is to continue to work with these organizations and to connect them with resources in their community to create sustainable, long-term changes that will help improve access to food and places to be active for children and their families.

“The Harnett County Partnership for Children is excited to have been awarded a Voices into Action mini-grant! This grant will allow 10-licensed childcare centers to benefit from technical assistance using Go NAP SACC (Nutrition and Physical Activity Self-Assessment for Child Care). Go NAP SACC is an easy-to-use tool for early care and education programs interested in building healthy eating and physical activity habits in children. Programs use Go NAP SACC to improve their practices, policies, and environments and meet best practices.”

~ Harnett County Partnership for Children project leader



Jody and Jacob Currin talk to Dawn Hubbard of Stoney Run Farm.

MOVING FORWARD: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Given all that we have learned by listening to community voices, surveying the community environment, and putting priorities into action: Where do we go from here? As mentioned above, the ACTION of the project continues. Harnett VIA is still hard at work on their action plan, with a renewed focus on the Shawtown neighborhood and its residents. Our partnership with EFNEP continues to expand, and food pantry classes at Martha's Place (5N2) have carried over into 2014. Additionally, a new round of mini-grants is just getting started, and we are excited to see where these innovative projects lead. We are also about to start another round of conversations with the same mothers and grandmothers we spoke with during the first year of our project, to hear how their VOICES and visions for their communities have changed.

Community-based work like this is always an ongoing process. As community members and organizations take ACTION, more VOICES are added to the mix in order to learn new priorities and new directions to take. As our work continues in Harnett County, we will continue to focus on the themes identified by our community partners and community residents: healthy eating, access to healthy foods and produce through farms and gardens, faith communities as partners, and food security. We will continue listening to community residents and organizations and collaborating on ways to improve access to healthy food and places to be active in Harnett County.

**We hope you
will join us!**







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