

Voices Into Action



2014 LEE COUNTY COMMUNITY FOOD ASSESSMENT





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INTRODUCTION

This assessment is part of Voices into Action: The Families, Food, and Health Project. Funded by the United States Department of Agriculture, Voices into Action is a partnership between North Carolina State University, North Carolina Agricultural & Technical State University, and North Carolina Cooperative Extension. We draw on research and community partnerships in three counties in North Carolina (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 Voices into Action researchers conducted this assessment of food resources in Lee 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 Lee County, as we build on community assets and the work of our partners in order to improve access to healthy and affordable food and safe places to be active.



One of Sanford's young residents shares her "budding idea" to make her neighborhood healthier.

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 represents a collaboration between North Carolina State University, North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, and North Carolina Coopera-

prevalence and challenges of food insecurity for families; 2) the importance of reliable nutrition information, 3) the value of farms and gardens, and 4) the significance of partnerships among community groups and residents. We also conducted community workshops, where community organizations and Lee County residents came together to identify assets and

priorities for action. People at the workshops told us about the importance of assets like the farmer's market, community gardens, and the health department and WIC office.

Our work also expanded INTO the community, as we learned more about how organizations, individuals and programs in Lee County were worked to improve access to food and places to be active. Working with community partners, community mentors, and students at North Carolina State University, we interviewed food pantry

directors and farmers and surveyed faith communities. We found out that many congregations (59% across three counties) already allowed residents and groups to use their gyms, playgrounds, and open areas for physical activity. In our conversations with food pantry directors in Lee County, we learned that 88% had experienced an increase in demand over the past year, and that 50% felt that they were unable to meet the needs of their clients. The farmers in Lee County may represent a potential source of fresh, local produce for these

tive Extension. We partner with community organizations and residents in each of these counties to promote access to healthy affordable foods and places to be active.

Our work started by with listening to the VOICES of community members. We talked to 124 mothers and grandmothers in total (with 40 of these interviews in Lee County) to learn about their experiences feeding their families. Some of the key themes that emerged from these conversations included: 1) the

Lee County Extension Director talks canning at Sanford's Day at the Garden event.



pantries. The eight farmers that we surveyed told us that they all had excess produce on their farms. Many donated through informal networks, but were not aware of additional opportunities for dealing with surplus produce, like gleaning, which involves collecting leftover crops from fields after they have been commercially harvested.

Finally, this project 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. The work of Voices into Action continues through the community-based action group, Lee Healthy Eating Active Living Task Force (Lee HEALTh), founded in 2012 after the completion of our community workshops. This group represents a diverse group of stakeholders. They have offered support for projects like the Peace and Unity Community Garden, in order to expand access to healthy foods for the people in Lee County. This group also advises and reviews mini-grant applications. In 2014, VIA awarded mini-grants to seven community-based projects across Lee County. These include: the Peace and Unity Community Garden, fitness classes at First Baptist Church of Sanford, space for physical activity at the Stevens Center, community gardens at West Lee Middle School and Cameron Grove AME Zion Church, and a walking trail at Fair Promise AME Zion.

By listening to community residents, we aim to encourage ACTION based on the VOICES of

the people of Lee 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, Lee HEALTh, 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.

Lee HEALTh Ribbon cutting with former Sanford mayor Cornelia Olive.



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 a community-based project like this one: 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 Lee 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 going to WIC appointments with them.

In addition to talking with these mothers and grandmothers, our efforts to hear community voices extended to organizations and residents in Lee County. We carried out two community workshops to learn more about how organizations and residents prioritized the issues around access to food and places to be active. We asked participants in these workshops to talk about the organizations and programs doing the best work in Lee

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 Lee County, several key themes emerged:

- ▶ **Food security:** Many people talked about their need for accessible, affordable food. In addition to federal food assistance (like SNAP and WIC benefits), people relied on food pantries and other emergency food providers to make ends meet, making these organizations crucial in Lee County.
- ▶ **Healthy eating:** Mothers and community residents emphasized the need for reliable, consistent nutrition information.
- ▶ **Partnerships:** Community organizations and residents talked with us about the need for increased partnerships to promote food access and physical activity. This includes increasing communication between organizations and the residents they serve, and enhancing partnerships between programs and groups.

We believe that effective community work begins by listening, and we hope that you learn, as we did, from the voices that emerge on the following pages.

VOICES OF FAMILIES IN LEE COUNTY

One of our goals with this project was to give mothers and grandmothers the opportunity to voice their experiences about feeding their families. In 2012 and 2013, we interviewed 40 mothers and grandmothers, caring for children ages 2-8, who lived in Lee County. The women who invited us into their homes shared important details with us about 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 the challenges of dealing with food insecurity, the importance of gardens, and the promises and difficulties of healthy eating.

Food Security:

Being food secure means that all members of a household have enough safe, nutritious food to live active and healthy lifestyles. According to Feeding America, almost 19% of people in Lee County are food insecure.¹ Among the families that we talked to, the percentage was much higher; 53% of households were food insecure. Many families (58%) received Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, which they said were a crucial food resource, but families still struggled to put food on the table.

The mothers and grandmothers we talked to worked very hard to make sure that their kids had enough to eat. Many mothers saw this as one of their most important roles. Mothers tended to go without food rather than allow their children to go to bed hungry if there was not enough food. But it was difficult to ensure that their families were “eating right.” Some of

the common barriers to “eating right” included limited money, a lack of access to healthier foods, time constraints, and family food preferences. In talking about Women Infants and Children (WIC) program and SNAP, mothers often expressed how the benefits were not quite enough to buy the ingredients they needed to cook healthy meals for their families. Families also faced obstacles to cooking at home, finding time to eat, and knowing how to prepare tasty, healthy food. Many parents worked unpredictable schedules and didn't often have a lot of time for themselves, which made it difficult to plan and find time to cook. Fruits and vegetables have a short shelf life, and it was hard to keep them from going bad, especially for families that shopped just once or twice a month. And if foods didn't taste good or there wasn't enough time to eat, adults would skip meals. In this sense, eating became a chore or duty rather than an enjoyable experience. This occurred with children as well. Many mothers described children who either “ate their families out of house and home” or were so picky that they worried whether they were getting the nutrients they needed. Children didn't always welcome new ingredients or unfamiliar meals, but were always eager to eat at fast food restaurants.

Just whatever I've prepared I'm probably just going to eat a lot less of whatever they eat. But it's been hard if we don't have meat. Like we don't have meat this week. So we're eating vegetables, which is hard for the kids...I mean there's just no way that we can feed ourselves meat wise, so that would be the only concern, the protein factor.

~ Lee 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.

Gardens:

Mothers talked about gardens with great nostalgia, as part of their childhoods or the way past generations lived. Thirty percent of the women we interviewed said that they gardened. Two-thirds of these women used a community garden, while others had a garden on their own land. Gardeners said that they gardened because their parents or grandparents had gardened, because the food tasted better, and because they thought gardening was a good activity for families and children. The people who did not garden said that they didn't have access to a place where they could grow their own food, they didn't know how to garden, or they didn't have time. Some people noted that when gardens produced too much of the same crop, it ultimately went to waste. One mother suggested that we help connect families with local farmers, who sometimes had extra produce they needed to get rid of.

Healthy Eating:

Mothers talked readily about the connections between food and health, but struggled with the confusing (and sometimes contradictory) messages that they had received. Some mothers talked about how the majority of advice they received about food was restrictive rather than positive: no sugar, no juice, no candy, no McDonald's, nothing fried. What was missing, they felt, were specific and practical things that they could do. They found the kind of advice they got was often too generic: exercise and eat right, use moderation in your portions. Doctors' visits seemed to be filled with health updates more than specific suggestions tailored to individual families. Some mothers told us

that they wouldn't mind more guidance from doctors, but that they didn't like it when the advice they got felt like a "one-size-fits-all" recommendation rather than a suggestion specific to their concerns.

In particular, they wondered how to eat healthy on a budget. Mothers said that they wanted to provide their families with more variety in their diets and especially to offer more fruits and vegetables. However, they also talked about how cheaper, sugary treats and fast food options often competed with more expensive foods, like fresh produce, that took time to prepare. Parents were aware that the trade-off for cheaper, affordable, and easy to prepare foods was often the quality of the food and its health benefits. They also talked about how the treats their children got at schools, churches, and community centers made it hard for parents who were trying to feed their kids healthier options.

In general, mothers and grandmothers in Lee County told us that it was important 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 also considered growing their own food, and wanted help thinking about how they could do that. Our next section on community voices echoes some of these themes.

COMMUNITY VOICES DRIVING COMMUNITY CHANGE

Building on what we learned from mothers and grandmothers, we conducted workshops with community organizations and residents in Lee County. We held workshops on September 28 and 29, 2012, at Lee County Cooperative Extension and the Boys and Girls Club in Sanford. The workshops focused on identifying community assets and priorities related to access to healthy foods and places to be active in Lee County.

On the first day of the workshops, we invited representatives from organizations in Lee County to participate. The second day brought community residents to the table to share their insights. The two groups came together in the afternoon of the second day, to talk about how

to move forward given the assets and priorities identified by both groups. Representatives from community organizations learned about programs and resources they were not aware of, like health ministries in congregations and after-school programs. Community residents realized that they had a lot in common with the organizations in Lee County: for example, their concern for the well-being of their families and children.

We asked each group to identify the organizations and programs that they thought were doing the best work in Lee County. Here are their results, in order of priority:

Organizational Representatives	Community Residents
YMCA	Parks
Health Department	After-school programs
Cooperative Extension and community gardens	WIC and Health Department
Christians United Outreach Center	Farmer's market
Communities in Schools of Lee County	Faith communities

Table 1: Exemplary Organizations

When asked why these organizations and programs were important, the people who came to

the workshops gave the following responses, in order of priority:

Organizational Representatives	Community Residents
Use networks and partnerships	Provide programming that children enjoy
Have strong leadership of organization	Provide programs or services that are affordable or free
Provide safe place for children's programs	Meet spiritual needs
Provide services for all ages and whole families	Provide safe locations
Are good stewards of their resources	Provide services for all ages and whole families

Table 2: Reasons Organizations Are Exemplary

Both groups named the health department and farmer's markets/community gardens as some of the most important resources in Lee County. Organizational representatives said they valued the health department's coalition-building work, while residents said they named the health department and WIC because they

"Because of the crisis that we are undergoing, I know churches provide in addition to food and help, they provide for the spiritual part as well."

~Community resident on why faith communities are important

helped with food costs and by providing access to nutritious foods. Overall, Lee County residents told us that they prioritized programs that are free or affordable and emphasized the importance of spiritual needs (in

addition to providing services and resources). Organizational representatives focused more on the characteristics of organizations, including exemplifying strong leadership and being financially sustainable.

At the end of the meeting, organizational representatives and county residents worked together to decide how to mobilize change and develop a plan for action. They identified transportation as the major need in the county, and brainstormed ideas to get organizations like faith communities involved in helping to transport residents from rural areas to programs and services in Sanford. They discussed working with representatives from Lee County government to determine how and if they could develop a more sustainable transportation plan. The groups also prioritized farmer's markets and gardens, and wondered how they could get more healthy foods into the hands of people who need it.

We asked each person who came to the workshop to tell us what they would do to help improve access to food and places to be active in Lee County. Here's a sample of what they pledged to do:

- ▶ Get in touch with organizations to serve as a volunteer once or twice a month.
- ▶ Gather information from the top 5 exemplar agencies or organizations to approach the transportation issue.
- ▶ Organize a community garden and vegetable delivery to non-profit groups.
- ▶ Gain support for the Sanford Farmer's Market from Cooperative Extension.
- ▶ Work towards starting cooking classes in schools.

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

"[I think] the biggest area of disconnect is the people who need the services not knowing that they're out there and how to tap into [them]. That's the biggest disconnect.

~ Agency representative, discussing the importance of communication

INTO

After hearing the voices of the people in Lee County, it was time to figure out how to put them INTO action. We partnered with several community organizations, including those identified as exemplars during the community workshops, in order to focus on some of the strategic priorities that had been identified, including:

- ▶ learning how to get healthy foods, particularly produce from local farms and gardens, to families that needed it most,
- ▶ finding out what food pantries were doing to meet the needs of food insecure families, and
- ▶ determining how faith communities could provide spaces for families to be more active.

Before taking action, we needed to have a sense of the scope of the issues and the community environment, including learning from the community organizations and individuals who grow and provide food and help children be more active. What resources did people have? How did community groups and organizations meet the needs of the families they serve? What additional support did these exemplary programs and organizations need? How could we build bridges and partnerships? To answer these questions, we talked to leaders of faith communities, food pantry directors, and farmers in Lee County. This work is the INTO part of Voices into Action.



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

Zumba class at First Baptist Church in Sanford.



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 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, this included gyms, playgrounds, and athletic spaces. Some of the other facilities that faith communities listed as open to groups or individuals included the 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 for 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 issues with availability (they do not have enough or adequate 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 the space or that they didn't know where to begin the process.

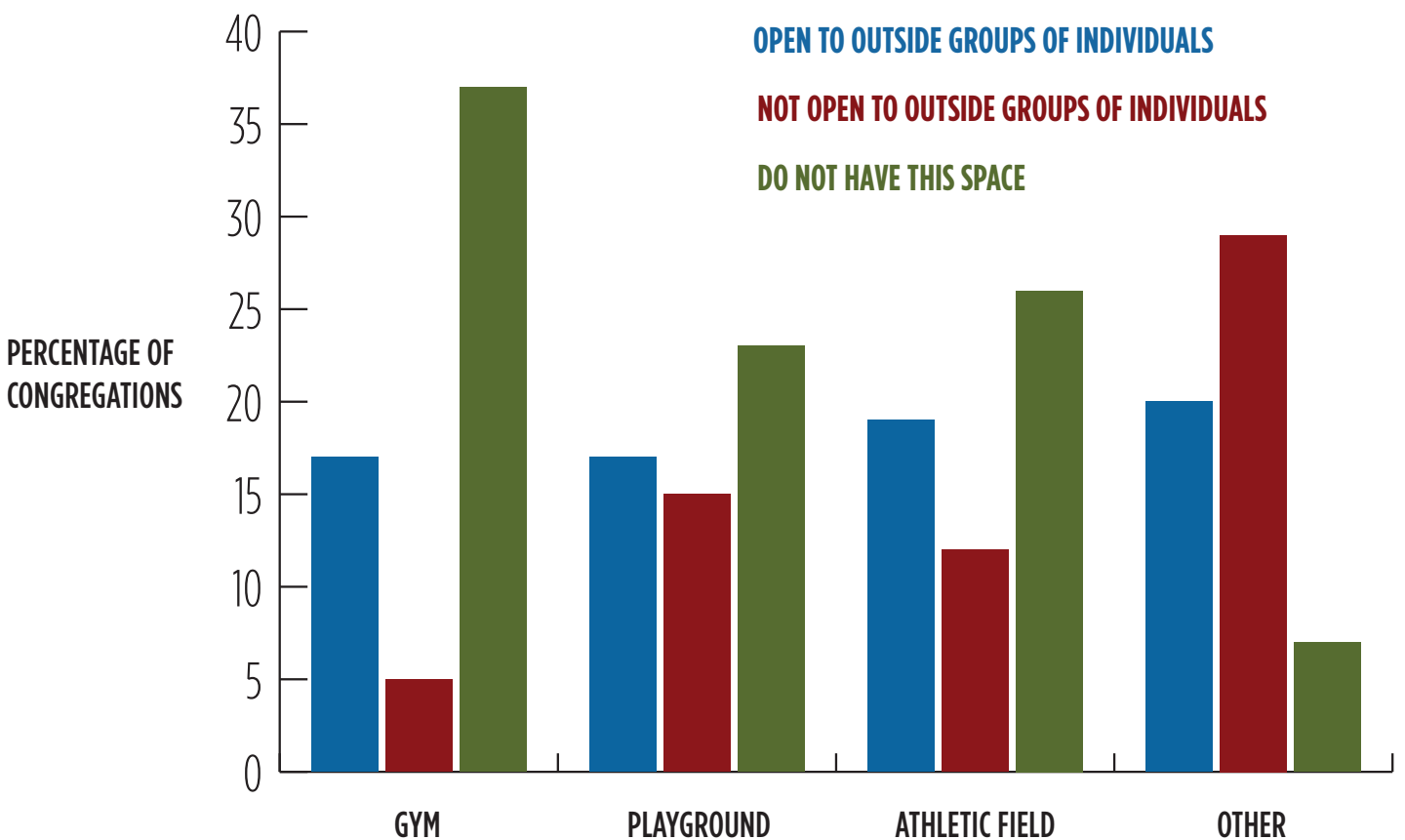
We were excited to see that among the congregations that did open their spaces up to outside groups or individuals, 45% said that they were willing to share their information with the community. Each county is creating a resource guide with this information, through the community-based action groups. 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 communities of faith (issues with availability, maintenance, and liability being three key concerns) when opening up their space to kids and their families for physical activity.

Figure 1

FACILITY USAGE IN FAITH COMMUNITIES



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 Lee County. We surveyed the pantries in Lee County, so that we could learn more about they were doing and the services they provided, and how we, along with our partners, could best support them.

We identified 10 food pantries in the county and completed interviews with eight of the directors. These directors gave us a great deal of insight into their perspective as provid-

“We have a very nice refrigerator, but it would be super to have a walk-in refrigeration system in order to store unlimited fresh fruits and vegetables.”

~ Food pantry director

ers, as well as the needs that they saw among their clients.

Food pantries varied widely in size; one served fewer than 70 clients per month,

while another provided food for almost 4,000 individuals each month. The median number of clients served per month at each food pantry was 240.

One of the most telling things we learned from pantry directors was how hard things had gotten for them in recent years. Eighty-eight percent of the directors surveyed indicated that the demand for their services has increased in the past year. Half felt like they were falling short of their clients’ needs (as opposed to meeting or exceeding their needs), and half also reported that they had turned away clients at least once due to a lack of food.

Pantries relied both on donations and purchased food to get the food they in turn provided to their clients. On average, 38% of the food pantries’ supply was donated, with the rest being purchased by the food pantry. Twenty-five percent of the pantries we surveyed, however, received less than 5% of their food in donations and were using their own funds to buy almost all of their food. Directors told us that the foods they needed most were meat, produce, and canned goods.

The pantry directors worked hard to provide their clients with a variety of foods, but struggled to provide frozen vegetables, fresh produce, and dairy products. On average, directors said that they provided canned fruits 10 months out of the year, canned vegetables almost 11 months out of the year, and meats 10 months out of the year. Frozen vegetables, on the other hand, were hardly ever available

A Sample of Food Pantry Missions

“To provide food, clothes, and spiritual guidance to people in need in Lee County.”

“To provide God’s love to all. To help, listen, and teach. To feed the hungry, serve as role models, and be a consistent friend.”

“To minister to the whole person – food, prayer, encouragement, hope.”

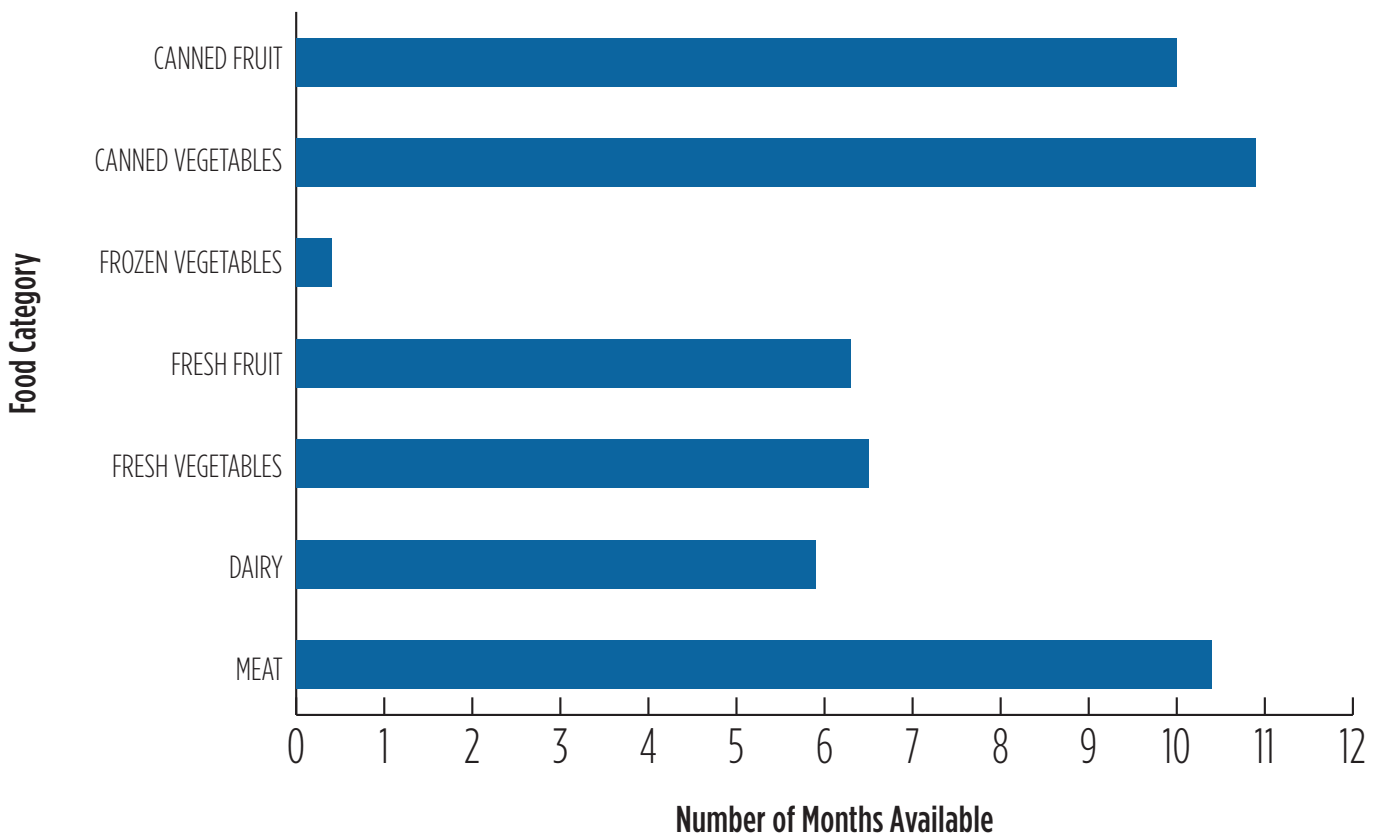
to clients, and fresh produce and dairy were only available about half of the time. The limited availability of frozen and fresh produce and dairy was likely due to pantries' lack of freezer and refrigeration space to keep these perishable items fresh.

Finally, we asked food pantry directors what additional services they would like to be able to offer. Directors overwhelmingly responded

that they would like to offer their clients educational resources and a focus on health and prevention, in addition to providing food. Lee HEALTH 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.

Figure 2

AVAILABILITY OF FOOD AT FOOD PANTRIES IN LEE COUNTY



WHO GROWS OUR FOOD? SURVEYING LEE COUNTY FARMERS

Many people talked about the importance of farming and gardening in Lee County. 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

"There is a strong demand for the product. Higher demand leads to consumers paying more for the product."

"It's getting rough. It's not lucrative. You can buy it cheaper than you can raise it."

*~ Lee County farmers,
discussing the market
for local food*

issues. With input from our community mentors, we developed a survey to be conducted with the farmers in Lee County, among fruit and vegetable and livestock farmers. 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 and Community Transformation Grant Healthy Eating/Active Living Coordinator, Kelley Richardson. We began surveying in Fall 2013. So far, we have interviewed eight farmers, and we are currently reaching out to include more farmers through a mail survey.

Of the eight farmers surveyed, four considered farming to be their primary occupation; however, only two indicated that all of their income came from farming. These farmers grew a wide range of crops, including strawberries, several types of vegetables, wheat, soybeans, nuts, and corn, and three also raised livestock (chickens, pigs, cows) for eggs and meat.

The farmers expressed varying opinions about how agriculture in Lee County was doing. The majority (63%) of the farmers surveyed reported that agriculture in Lee County was either "doing ok" or "struggling." Others were more hopeful: 25% said farming in Lee county was "doing well" or "thriving."

Farmers told us that their biggest concerns were the changing prices of produce, high costs of production, and high land prices. Some farmers also mentioned a lack of time, unpredictable weather, or environmental regulations as challenges.

The farmers that we surveyed sold their produce through various outlets: at their farm or a roadside stand, at farmer's markets, or to friends and family members. Twenty-five percent of farmers said that they already accepted Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT)/SNAP (food stamps) as payment, and an additional 38% said that they would soon start accept-

"[There is a] lack of demand, and problems with weather and with deer."

"The ever-changing rules about sales make me fearful about violating the rules."

"Time. Most farmers have two jobs. They have to make a living."

*~Lee County farmers,
on the challenges they face*

ing this form of payment. The farmers who accepted EBT/SNAP said that because of the high demand for farmers who accepted EBT/SNAP at markets in Lee County, doing so increased their revenue.. As of the 2014 season, all farmers who participate in the Sanford Farmers' Market are able to accept EBT/SNAP, as well as WIC and Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program vouchers. Two farmers who did not accept EBT/SNAP at their farm or roadside stand said they did not consider it because they were not interested in additional paperwork or fees.

All eight farmers reported that they sometimes had a surplus of produce or meat on their farms. Most donated their excess produce or meat to churches, food pantries, or neighbors. Many also fed excess produce to their animals, when the produce was not optimal for human consumption. Only one farmer allowed glean-ing on the farm.

Our ultimate goal in working with the farmers is to increase their visibility in the community and to help increase community members' access to healthy, local foods.



ACTION

This work is carried out in communities and by communities. In this section, we explore the ways that Lee 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 Lee County, including representatives from Cooperative Extension, the Health Department, a large food pantry, the Boys and Girls Club, and the Lee County Partnership for Children. We had individual meetings with the leaders of each of these organizations in order to learn more about the community from their perspectives.



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

1. **Community-Based Action Groups:** After community mapping workshops were completed 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, Lee HEALTH, forms the backbone of the community-based work happening in Lee County. This group sets the priorities for action, helps to review and revise mini-grants, and develops partnerships to facilitate change related to improving access to food and places to be active.
2. **Mini-Grants:** We have funded mini-grant projects that support the VIA mission of increasing access to affordable foods and places to be active and the priorities identified by mothers, residents and county organizations. These projects vary in scope, but have included things like community gardens, faith-based walking trails, exercise programs, and nutrition education.

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

After the asset-mapping workshops that we held in 2012, we brought Lee County residents and representatives of community organizations together 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 in Lee County.

Building Partnerships

The Lee County Health Department already had a group of community leaders in place, through LeeCAN (Lee Community Action

Network), which focused on addressing health and safety issues throughout the county. The goals of this group aligned with those of VIA, so we met with the executive board of LeeCAN, who agreed that joining forces would be a natural partnership. We formed a LeeCAN subcommittee dedicated to community-based nutrition and physical activity initiatives. We invited community residents and organizational representatives to the first meeting of this group, which took place in January 2013. One of the first tasks for the group, which voted on the name Lee Healthy Eating Active Living Task Force (Lee HEALTH), was to develop goals for the coming years.

The group agreed upon the following mission statement and goals:

MISSION STATEMENT:

“To increase awareness and accessibility to healthy and affordable food and fitness through education, advocacy, and environmental changes.”

GOAL #1:

Coordinate food pantries, gleaning groups, volunteers, farmers, local markets, and organizations to bring healthy, local food to Lee County residents and to connect resources to food pantries.

GOAL #2:

Work with the Housing Authority to pilot a program that involves creating pocket parks and gardens at their complexes.

Putting Plans Into Action

Lee HEALTH's original goals ultimately led to the following overarching themes in the county:

- Addressing food security, with a focus on community gardens;
- Building partnerships; and
- Providing nutrition education.

Within these goals, Lee HEALTH members identified several outcomes they hoped to accomplish over the coming years:

LEE HEALTH GOALS AND DESIRED LONG-TERM OUTCOMES

Bring pocket parks and gardens to low-income housing complexes.

Improve access to healthy, affordable food through partnerships and coordinated efforts among nutrition education programs, local farmers, gleaning groups, volunteer organizations, gardens, food pantries, and soup kitchens.

Residents in low-income housing neighborhoods in Lee County will have increased access to healthy foods and places to be active.

Residents in low-income housing neighborhoods will increase their intake of healthy foods and increase physical activity.

Food pantries and soup kitchens in Lee County will have increased access to healthy foods.

Lee County residents using food pantries and soup kitchens will incorporate more healthy foods in their diet.

Local farmers will have increased markets in Lee County for their produce.

Lee HEALTH first focused on working with the existing Peace and Unity Community Garden, a local community garden that operated in partnership with Brick Capital Community Development Center. Lee HEALTH aimed to help the Peace and Unity Community Garden in expand its reach within the community. Working with the Garden board, we held a “Day at the Garden” in June 2013, to publicize the garden within the local community and hear about residents’ priorities for the garden and neighboring Horton Park. In addition to the Peace and Unity Garden, we are now also supporting two new community gardens in Lee County, one at Cameron Grove AME Zion Church in Broadway and one at West Lee Middle School in Sanford.

Lee HEALTH is a group of passionate community partners. We are excited to continue to work with this group in the future, as they build on successes and develop new visions for Lee County, based on community research and involvement.

In addition to helping support the development of community gardens in Lee County, the following action items are also currently in progress:

- ▶ **Connecting farmers and food pantries:** After interviewing farmers and food pantry directors, Lee HEALTH is beginning a project to connect the Society for St. Andrews (an organization that focuses on gleaning) with farmers to provide technical assistance.
- ▶ **Creating opportunities for nutrition education:** Lee HEALTH would like to connect food pantry directors with nutrition education services through the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP). A Lee County pilot class started in Spring 2014 and is based on the work VIA has done with Harnett County food pantries.

COMMUNITIES IN ACTION: VIA MINI-GRANTS

In order to facilitate community-led action, in 2014 we awarded mini-grants to seven Lee County organizations with creative proposals for improving access to healthy and affordable food and safe 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 Peace and Unity Garden (PUG) has really inspired the community. Feeding people food for the soul is our mission, our intentions are to encourage people to experience peace and unity while being healthy and having fun in the fresh air.”

~ PUG coordinator

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.

Peace and Unity
Community Garden.





A sampling of produce at the Sanford Farmer's Market.

Our first round of mini-grants was awarded in January 2014, after being reviewed by Voices into Action staff, community mentors, and members of Lee HEALTH, as well as by the USDA. The following organizations and individuals were awarded mini-grants:

- **The Peace and Unity Community Garden** to expand its reach within the community to encourage children and families to learn how to grow and prepare their own healthy foods;
- **Cameron Grove AME Zion Church:** to support the development of a community garden through which half of the produce grown will be donated to a food pantry;
- **West Lee Middle School:** to develop a teaching garden at the school where students can learn about growing, cooking, and eating healthy foods, and to donate produce to families in need;
- **Sanford Farmer's Market:** to increase advertising and promotional activities in order to better connect families to local produce;
- **Stevens Center:** to create a grassy area for outdoor play and to develop a physical activity policy statement;
- **Fair Promise AME Zion Church:** to provide a walking trail that will be open to the public, and encourage both physical activity and water consumption to church members; and
- **First Baptist Church of Sanford:** to provide very low-cost Zumba classes to the community three days per week throughout the year.

Working with Lee HEALTH, our goal is to continue to work with these organization 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.

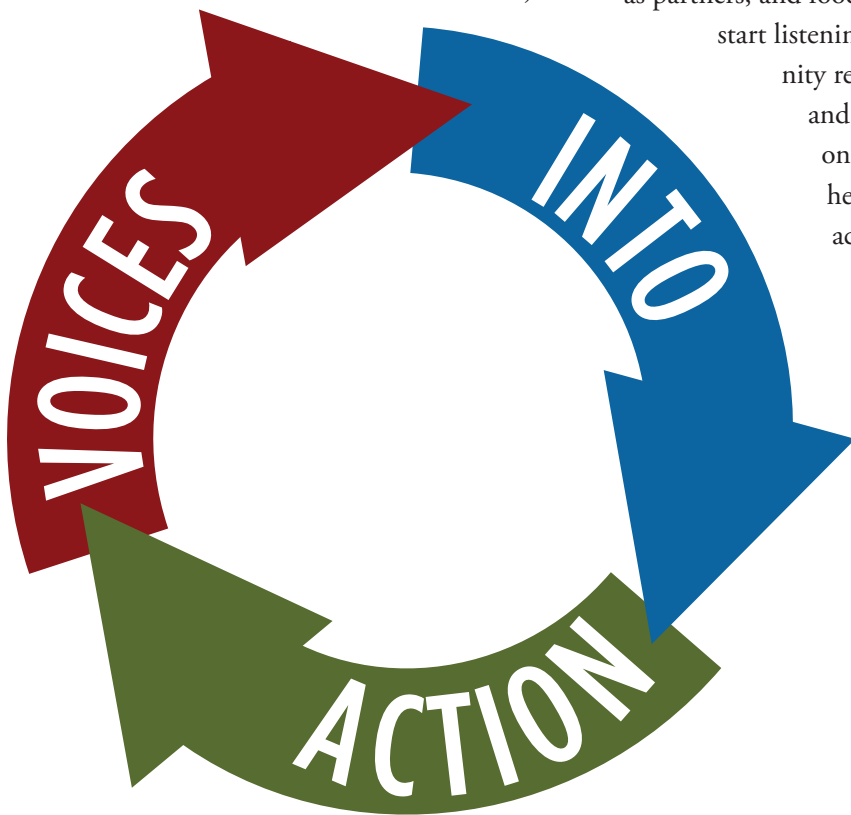


MOVING FORWARD: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

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. Lee HEALTH is still hard at work on their action plan, with a renewed focus on connecting food pantries and farmers. Since the Lee HEALTH group has prioritized nutrition education, we continue to build our partnership with the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) in the county, in order to offer practical tips for eating healthy and getting active to community partners and groups. An EFNEP class in Lee County pantries started in spring of 2014, and interactive sessions at local organizations that serve kids and young people are planned for the summer of 2014. Additionally, the 2014 mini-grantees are just

getting started, and we are excited to see where these innovative projects lead. We are also about to start another round of interviews 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 Lee County and in other counties in North Carolina, 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 are ready to start listening once more to community residents and organizations and to continue collaborating on ways to improve access to healthy food and places to be active in Lee County.



**We hope you
will join us!**



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