FOOD SECURITY PLAN

to address the needs of low income residents of Washtenaw County
HUNGER RELIEF AND FOOD GATHERERS

Food Gatherers is the food rescue/food bank program serving Washtenaw County. Our mission is to alleviate hunger and eliminate its causes in our community. We rescue food from a variety of local sources including wholesalers, grocery stores, dormitories, and farms and re-distribute it quickly and safely to a non-profit network of shelters, after school programs, low-income housing sites, residential treatment homes and organizations on the front line of hunger relief.

Food Gatherers’ intentional efforts to access more healthy foods leads to increased costs for the organization, either by direct purchasing or subsidizing the cost of transporting of donated produce via the national food bank system. Healthier foods most often require refrigeration which is always more costly than shelf stable items. Rising need in the community combined with rising food cost has increased Food Gatherers’ budget for food purchasing by almost 200% in the last four years.

Clearly, however, an investment in ensuring access to nutritious, high quality foods is an investment in health for individuals and for the community.

To accomodate the rising need in the community, Food Gatherers’ budget for food has increased by 200% in the last four years.
WELCOME

Food Gatherers is pleased to share this Food Security Plan for the low-income residents of Washtenaw County. Our commitment is to increase food security for these residents and to align these efforts with a larger vision of community food security.

This plan was informed by the experiences and insights of our neighbors who use the emergency pantries in our current distribution system, an analysis of the current state of food security and food access in Washtenaw County, and a review of leading national practices. The plan identifies both near-term and long-term strategies to enhance individual and community food security.

This plan rests on the foundation of commitments by many individuals and organizations striving daily to build a healthier and more just community. Much work lies ahead and we have the road map to make wise investments.

We ask you to join us in securing the needed awareness and resources to end hunger and its causes in Washtenaw County.

Eileen Spring
President/Chief Executive Officer
Food Gatherers

Kevan Lawlor
President/Board of Directors
Food Gatherers

This community assessment and plan was made possible by funding from:
United Way of Washtenaw County, Ann Arbor Area Community Foundation, James A. and Faith Knight Foundation and Food Gatherers.
Both individual food security and community food security principles and practices inspired this inquiry and inform this plan.

Individual food security is a term used to describe a person’s confidence in knowing that they will have enough food to feed themselves and their household. In the United States, community approaches to ensuring individual food security typically focus on food procurement and distribution through pantry networks and service agencies and access to government programs such as food stamps.

Community Food Security (CFS) efforts frequently include system wide strategies to enhance the vitality of local food economies. Focus areas can include the development of quality, affordable food outlets, support for small and medium sized farms and protection of the agricultural land needed to support the food needs of the community. CFS principles include a high value on sustainable, system based solutions.

The vibrancy of a local food system clearly affects the ability of a community to meet the food needs of low income residents. We believe that breaking the cycle of poverty and hunger requires long-term systemic solutions and participation by all sectors of the community.

Simultaneously, the urgent and dramatically increasing demand for food within Washtenaw County merits an immediate commitment to ensuring more food in the current hunger relief distribution system.

The strategies outlined in this plan are designed to respond to this urgent need now AND to invest in sustainable practices that maximize self directed, easy access to affordable, healthy, high quality foods for low income neighbors.

“Community food security is a condition in which all community residents obtain a safe, culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through a sustainable food system that maximizes community self-reliance and social justice.”

Mike Hamm and Anne Bellows, Coalition for Community Food Security
HUNGER AND HEALTH IN WASHTENAW COUNTY

In the spring of 2008 in Washtenaw County, there were 49,887 individuals living in poverty with a 6.4% rate of unemployment. Washtenaw County has the highest cost of living in the state, making it especially difficult to eat healthfully with limited resources.

An analysis of the Washtenaw County Health Improvement Plan Survey of 2005 makes it clear that living in poverty is unhealthy. People living in poverty in Washtenaw County face a much higher likelihood of having high cholesterol, diabetes and obesity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Health Condition</th>
<th>Total County Population</th>
<th>Those who earn less than $35,000/year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High Cholesterol</td>
<td>32.1%</td>
<td>64.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diabetes</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
<td>14.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obesity</td>
<td>18.1%</td>
<td>26.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

National studies show that high fat, high sugar foods are often significantly cheaper and more filling than fresh fruits, vegetables and healthy proteins. Local pantry clients overwhelmingly cited cost as the major obstacle to eating fresh, healthy foods.

In 2008, there were 49,887 individuals living in poverty in Washtenaw County. Local pantry clients cited cost as the major obstacle to eating healthy foods.
THE PLANNING PROCESS AND GUIDING QUESTIONS

The United Way of Washtenaw County identified alleviating hunger as one of five strategic areas to inform their current and future investment of community dollars. They invited Food Gatherers to serve as a lead agency in this inquiry and provided funding to assess the impact of current efforts on the part of private, non-government agencies in meeting the needs of low income people in Washtenaw County. Food Gatherers leveraged additional funding from the Ann Arbor Area Community Foundation and the Knight Foundation to support this community assessment and planning process.

This effort focused on partner agencies that are on the frontline of hunger relief: multi-service, non-government agencies that provide food assistance as well as the grassroots, volunteer-driven pantries being operated in community centers, health clinics and/or churches. Food Gatherers provides 70% of the food these programs distribute.

In this work we sought to understand the immediate reality of people’s needs, assess the current efforts to meet them, as well as identify emerging opportunities to achieve greater food security for all members of our community.

These guiding questions shaped our approach to the assessment and planning process:

- Who is using food pantries and how can this information refine our approaches to enhancing food security?
- What access do low income households have to fresh, healthy food from all sources--grocery stores, farmer’s markets, food pantries, meal programs and gardens? What impedes access to healthy foods?
- What is the current and potential capacity of food pantries in the County?
- Where are the largest unmet needs?
- What are some national leading practices that could be effective in Washtenaw County?

We investigated these questions using the following process:

- Review of existing local public health research and local and national food security studies.
- Development of maps that showed the neighborhoods of high density poverty in the County. These maps were then overlaid with the locations of high volume food pantries, and the private sector food retailers that accept food stamps and also offer nutritious foods.
- Surveys and interviews of people using food pantries.
- Surveys of agencies that operate food pantries and meal programs.
- Summary of national leading practices related to building both individual and community food security within communities.
- Data review and goal development meetings with nonprofit, government and food security partners.

Food Gatherers provides 70% of the food that is used to provide food assistance by emergency pantries.
SIGNIFICANT FINDINGS

To better understand food need and food security in Washtenaw County, two surveys were conducted between August and October 2008.

In August 2008, 44 food pantry and emergency meal programs in Washtenaw County participated in the survey process. The survey investigated the number of households served by the programs, sources of food, availability of fresh fruits and vegetables, data collected by the agencies, and types of referrals offered to clients. In September and October 2008, a survey was completed by 447 clients at 20 food pantry or distribution programs, as well as at the Ypsilanti Farmer’s Market. The survey gathered data regarding family and personal demographics, grocery store use and satisfaction, pantry use and satisfaction, food security and use of publicly funded food assistance programs, such as food stamps and Women, Infant and Children Nutrition Program (WIC).

The following summary represents the most informative and compelling findings of those surveys.

Pantry Customers

Three quarters of the people using emergency pantries are ‘food insecure’. ‘Food insecurity’ refers to a person’s risk of not being able to provide food for oneself or one’s family. Of the people using emergency food pantries, 76% qualify as ‘food insecure’, and 39% of the households have the most severe condition of ‘very low food security’.

Households receiving services have extremely low incomes. 85% of households report incomes of less than $500 per month per household member. 40% of households are not in the work force, often living on fixed incomes due to age or disability.

Use of food pantries is long-term. About 75% of respondents indicated that they receive food from a food pantry on a regular basis; and for 35% of respondents the pantry is their only or primary source of food. Only 25% use the food pantry as a short-term emergency source.

Many households see themselves as worse off than last year. 44% describe their household as worse off than last year, 18% as better off, and 38% as about the same. This description of households experiencing decreasing financial and food security aligns with the increased demand for services seen by agencies serving people in poverty.

Employment did not protect households against food insecurity. The employment and income that clients of food pantries reported was not sufficient to protect the household from food insecurity. While the rate of food insecurity among those who were employed, either part-time or full-time, was slightly lower (82%) than those who were unemployed (89%), the difference was not significant.

About 76% of respondents received food from a food pantry on a regular basis, 35% of these respondents indicated the pantry is their only source of food.
SIGNIFICANT FINDINGS

Access to Healthy Food

Daily consumption of fruits and vegetables is well below healthy levels. Access to fresh produce is limited because of cost. Only 13% of those surveyed eat the USDA recommended daily five servings of fruits and vegetables. Among those eating fewer than five servings of fruits and vegetables, 70% indicate that the high cost of fruits and vegetables contributes to preventing them from consuming more. Only 23% of respondents visit a farmer’s market weekly or monthly during the growing season. About 22% of respondents grow some of their own food; among those who do not, approximately 20% indicated that they would like to.

Clients are satisfied with the quality and selection of fresh produce at grocery stores and pantries. More than 92% of respondents are somewhat or very satisfied with the selection and quality of fresh produce at their primary grocery store. The selection and quality of fresh produce at food pantries is rated near 90% satisfied. Of remaining concern is the fact that only one out of five food pantries always has fresh produce available, while 23% of food pantries usually do not have fresh produce available, and 18% never have produce. Additionally, there are 124 food retail businesses in Washtenaw County that accept food stamps, but only 36 of those stores offer fresh produce.

Many households do not have access to a vehicle, yet access to both pantries and grocery stores is considered satisfactory. More than 90% of respondents are satisfied with the ease of access to food pantries and grocery stores. However, only about 55% of respondents use their own vehicle to travel to a grocery store or food pantry, while around 20% rely on a friend or relative to take them and another 15% walk. Analysis of maps shows that there are multiple pantries and grocery stores within five miles of the highest density poverty neighborhoods in Washtenaw County.

Pantry Capacity

The days and hours of operation in a majority of the food pantries are limited. Even with clients expressing satisfaction with access to pantries, an analysis of hours of operation demonstrates the significant variation in the capacity of pantries and confirms challenging limitations. There are 46 pantries that provide food to the public in the Food Gatherers’ network, yet only ten pantries are open eight or more hours per week. Programs are available each day of the week, although only 11 of the 44 pantry programs are open on either Saturday or Sunday. About one-third of the programs operate three or more days per week, another third are available one or two days per week, and the remaining third distribute food one or two times per month.
SIGNIFICANT FINDINGS

More on Pantry Capacity

There is limited availability of fresh produce and meats, especially at smaller pantries. As noted above, fresh fruits and vegetables are always available at only 21% of pantry programs, while 23% of food pantries usually do not have fresh produce available, and an additional 18% never do. Larger programs appear to have the capacity to provide meat or fruits and vegetables on a regular basis and the selection and quality of the produce provided by these pantries is viewed as satisfactory by clients.

The demand for services has increased while agency resources have not.
In the past year, approximately half of all agencies reported facing excess demand that resulted in purchases of additional food or referrals to another agency. Agencies project that the amount of dollars they will be able to budget for food purchases in 2009 is decreasing relative to 2008.

Most agencies collect household data from the people who use their food pantry, but this is not done in a manner that allows for community wide analysis of use and needs. While many pantries collect information from their clients (age, gender, income, household size, employment status and information on participation in other food assistance programs), there is not a consistent set of data collected, nor are households identified in a manner that supports unduplicated counts. This limits effective community wide understanding of who is in need and who is being served by these programs.

Clients perceive very little support from pantries with other services such as assistance with food stamps and referrals for job training. There is a disconnection between what agencies perceive they are offering and what clients report receiving as regarding help accessing ancillary services. For example, 30% of pantries report offering assistance with food stamps applications, yet only 13% of clients reported receiving that support. 59% of agencies report offering referrals to other non food assistance programs, while only 24% of clients reported receiving such support.

In the last year, half of all agencies reported so much demand that they had to purchase additional food or make referrals to another agency.
SIGNIFICANT FINDINGS

High Unmet Needs

Families with children have dramatic rates of food insecurity. Families with children have an overwhelming rate of food insecurity (92%) with parents frequently saying they skip meals and make portions smaller to make food last longer.

Additional food assistance programs are underused by food insecure households. Only 47% of households use food stamps. Among households that did not use the food stamp program, over 40% believe that they are not eligible; an additional 24% indicated that they have applied for the program and have been denied. Among those not receiving food stamps, about 73% would be eligible for the program based on the gross income that was reported on the survey. Food insecure households were not more likely to use WIC, free meal programs, or the Towner surplus food distribution program/commodities. However, food insecure households did participate in the school lunch program at significantly higher rates, with 39% of food insecure households participating versus only 10% of food secure households participating.

LEADING PRACTICES

A review of leading practices in the fight against hunger nationally encourages new thinking about methods to enhance access, diversify food sources and improve quality of food. Hunger relief organizations are moving beyond a reliance on donated foods to lead and collaborate on initiatives that help ensure easy access for clients to food stamps, secure contracts with local farmers to secure healthier produce and proteins, and support garden projects in low income neighborhoods. Principles of cross-sector partnerships, environmental sustainability and increased client self-reliance are guiding decision-making in progressive food banks across the nation. Please see Appendix E for an overview of such practices in action.
Strategic Priorities

Increase the quantity and quality of nutritious food available for people in need:
- Increase purchase and donations of healthy foods through creative food procurement strategies:
  - Establish or lease a local farm dedicated to low income households.
  - Engage community gardeners to grow specific foods for donation/distribution.
  - Increase access to food stamps.

Strengthen partner agency capacity:
- Focus on building the capacity of high-volume, high-access pantries. Capacity building priorities include the development of staff skills and tools to ensure consistent data collection, build understanding of client civil rights and increase successful referrals for food stamps and other services.

Optimize all aspects of the system to ensure efficiency and maximum impact:
- Improve the efficiency and effectiveness in the hunger relief distribution system by engaging and educating partners in understanding the system and related community services.
- Assess the costs and benefits of a “mobile pantry” that could move to the neighborhoods and/or a large collaborative, client choice pantry that would operate in the style of a small, free grocery store with support for accessing other needed services.

Advocate to influence policies that affect people who are hungry:
- Influence policies and resources to address injustice and inequity. Educate and engage the local community about the reality of food insecurity and resources needed.
- Advocate regarding food stamp access, policy changes and resources needed at the national, state and local levels.

Only 10 of the 46 pantries that provide food in the Food Gatherers network are open 8 or more hours a week.
One of the anti-hunger movement’s greatest assets is volunteers; one of its greatest challenges is ensuring that the volunteer support is directed towards the greatest community need and that it is coordinated in such a way as to have a tangible and measurable impact. In all of these recommendations, we seek smarter coordination among and between volunteer groups, service providers and the public and private human services sector.

This plan is necessarily ambitious. There are assets within our community that can be leveraged to generate the needed partnerships and resources to increase individual and community food security in Washtenaw County. These include:

- The broad set of community relationships that exist within the Food Gatherers procurement and distribution network. Community awareness, resources and volunteers all can be generated by outreach and engagement within this diverse, cross-sector group;
- The ‘hard assets’ within Food Gatherers’ infrastructure: trucks, warehouse and skilled staffing;
- The strategic focus on the value of healthy food and the creative outreach to low income households by Washtenaw County Public Health Department;
- The community farming and gardening knowledge, skills and resources of the Food System Economic Partnership (FSEP), Growing Hope and Project Grow; and
- A community that values health and justice.

“The outrage of hunger amidst plenty will not be solved by ‘experts’ somewhere. It will only be solved when people like you and me decide to act.”

Frances Moore Lappe
PARTNERS IN PLANNING

To ensure a well informed and broadly supported plan, Food Gatherers engaged individuals and organizations who have personal and professional experience with food insecurity as well as those whose work aligns with supporting health and social justice in our community. We express our appreciation for the work and support of the following individuals and organizations:

- The 447 individuals who use food pantries who participated in extensive interviews and surveys.
- The staff and volunteers of 44 partner agencies (side bar listing the pantries and meal programs).
- Ruth Blackburn, Ecology Center
- Sharon Sheldon, Jenna Bacolor, Washtenaw County Public Health
- Susan Sweet Scott, Older Adult Services, Washtenaw County
- Amanda Edmonds, Growing Hope
- Boston Consulting Group and the student team from Ross School of Business
- Trudy Hall and Glenda Sneed, University of Michigan Health Systems, Program for Multicultural Health

A special appreciation goes to Gleaners Community Food Bank and Greg Kozlowski who donated significant time and expertise in developing maps that included pantries, grocery stores and neighborhoods with high poverty to inform our understanding of current resources and areas of high need.

STUDY TEAM

- Eileen Spring, President/CEO, Food Gatherers
- Marti Lachapell, Director of Agency Relations, Food Gatherers
- Tina Sang, Intern, University of Michigan Schools of Public Health and Social Work
- Francine Alexander, Managing Consultant, Alexander Resources Consulting, LLC
- Flannery Campbell, Senior Researcher, Alexander Resources Consulting, LLC
Hunger feels like pincers,
like the bite of crabs,
it burns and has no fire,
Hunger is a cold fire.
Let us sit down to eat
with all those who haven’t eaten;
let us spread great tablecloths,
put salt in the lakes of the world,
set up planetary bakeries,
tables with strawberries in the snow,
and a plate like the moon itself
from which we all eat.

For now I ask no more
than the justice of eating.

-Pablo Neruda