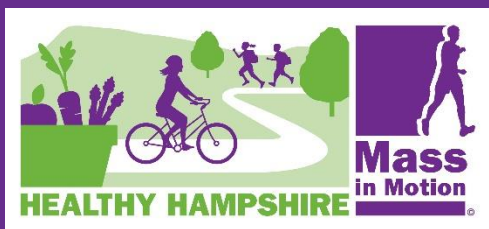


2019



Report and Action Plan

Amherst Food Justice Planning Process

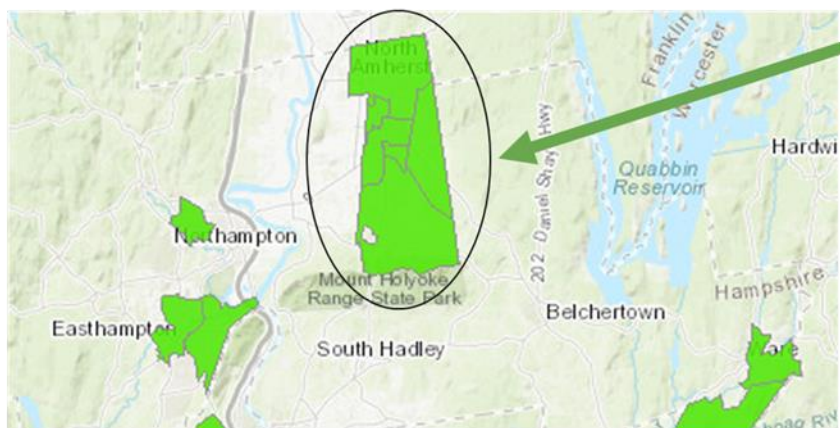
Amherst Food Justice

Report on the Amherst Food Justice Planning Process, 2018 – 2019

Background

Amherst is home to roughly 38,000 residents living in over 9,200 households. Three colleges and universities contribute to the town's economy and population, including the University of Massachusetts, Amherst College, and Hampshire College. Due to the presence of these institutions, a substantial percentage of the town's population is comprised of students, faculty, and staff of the colleges. At \$50,203, the town's median income is 43% lower than that of the state. 33% of the population lives below the poverty line and 8% of the population receives SNAP (food stamps).

All but the smallest of the town's seven census tracts are identified as "food deserts" by the USDA Food Access Research Atlas, meaning that a significant percentage of the population in those census tracts is both low-income and lives more than a mile from a full-service grocery store.

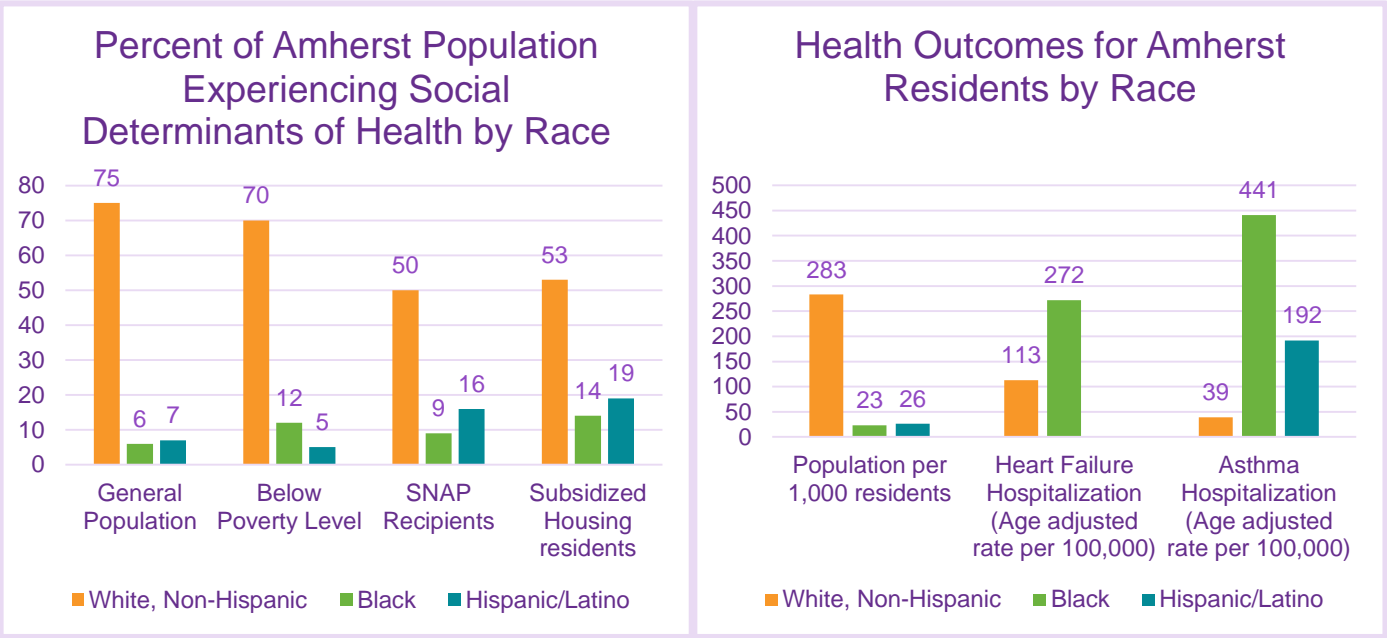


97% of Amherst residents live in a food desert (shown in green), including 3,700 children and 2,800 seniors

1 in 4 Amherst residents is low-income and lives more than a mile from a supermarket

Source: Economic Research Service (ERS), U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). Food Access Research Atlas, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-access-research-atlas/>

Food insecurity and its consequences disproportionately affect families of color in Amherst. While Black and Latino residents make up 6% and 7% of the Amherst population respectively, they make up 14% and 19% of the residents living in HUD-subsidized housing, and 100% of multi-unit subsidized housing developments reside in food desert census tracts. Long-term food insecurity can lead to chronic disease. Heart failure hospitalization rates in Amherst are 82% higher among Black residents than White residents. Black and Latino residents are 167% more likely and 132% more likely, respectively, to be hospitalized for asthma than White residents in Amherst.



In spite of these challenges, Amherst residents benefit from a number of the town’s assets that help them address their food needs. A robust network of social service providers help Amherst families navigate crises and find paths out of challenging circumstances. These include, among many others, the Center for Human Development’s Family Outreach of Amherst--which supports and assists families who struggle with mental health, trauma, medical, substance abuse, and life skills issues--and the Amherst Survival Center--which provides a welcoming community where families and individuals who are struggling to make ends meet can come for food, clothing, health care and for companionship and relief from isolation. Both have been integral parts of meeting the food needs of Amherst residents while creating a welcoming communal atmosphere through shared meals, discussion, and learning opportunities.

Additional assets include town-sponsored community gardens, free public transportation to local grocery stores, participation in the Valley Bikeshare program, and a handful of direct marketing farms that participate in state and

federal nutrition benefit programs through farm stands and the downtown farmers market. Various groups have come together to protect and leverage these assets, such as Grow Food Amherst, the Common Share Food Co-op Board, the Agricultural Commission, the Energy and Climate Action Committee, and the Conservation Commission.

Healthy Hampshire's Role in Amherst

Healthy Hampshire's engagement with the Town of Amherst began in 2012 when Amherst joined a consortium of towns to apply for a Massachusetts Municipal Wellness and Leadership grant. Also known as Mass in Motion, this chronic-disease prevention grant continues to this day and is administered by the City of Northampton in partnership with the Collaborative for Educational Services, which provides staffing to carry out the work plan. Early projects with the Town of Amherst focused on assessments related to equitable access to transportation and community gardens.

In 2015, Healthy Hampshire hired youth to survey their family and neighbors living in the apartment complexes off of East Hadley Rd about their challenges relating to transportation; the youth also completed a photo documentation project about their experiences getting around the community. Data from that survey was shared with other town departments and was one factor that led to the investment of Community Development Block Grant funding for sidewalk reconstruction on East Hadley Rd. A second assessment in 2016 involved the Conservation Department and sought to understand peoples' interest in community gardening at the new Fort River Farm. Surveys, again collected by Amherst youth who were employed through a summer jobs program, targeted people living in nearby housing complexes, including Colonial Village and Watson Farm. In 2016, Healthy Hampshire and the City of Northampton were awarded a three-year grant to expand Mass in Motion projects. This offered an opportunity to provide more staff and funding to member towns to support walkability and access to healthy food. In Amherst, this resulted in multi-year support for the development of a complete streets policy, which was passed in 2018. Additionally, it offered an opportunity for expanded regional food access assessment and planning work.

Amherst Food Justice Planning Process

In 2017, Healthy Hampshire completed a Hampshire County Food Access Assessment¹ that identified challenges and prioritized solutions for increasing food

¹ Report available at: http://www.healthyhampshire.org/content/6-resources/food-access-assessment-report_finalna.pdf

security in Hampshire County. This community-engaged assessment included data collection in Amherst, but no Amherst residents or food security practitioners were involved in the process of generating and prioritizing solutions. Given Amherst's food security challenges apparent in the data, Healthy Hampshire and its key partners decided an important next step would be to start conversations with Amherst residents about the root causes of those challenges and how to address them. In 2018, Healthy Hampshire partnered with the Center for Human Development's Family Outreach of Amherst (FOA) to facilitate conversations about the concept and causes of food insecurity at FOA's monthly community lunches, which brought together underserved residents to socialize and learn about resources and opportunities available to them.

The Community Lunch group went through an exercise to identify chronic disease outcomes in Amherst, the behaviors that lead to those outcomes and the root causes of those behaviors. The following outcomes, behaviors, and root causes were identified:

Chronic Disease Outcomes:

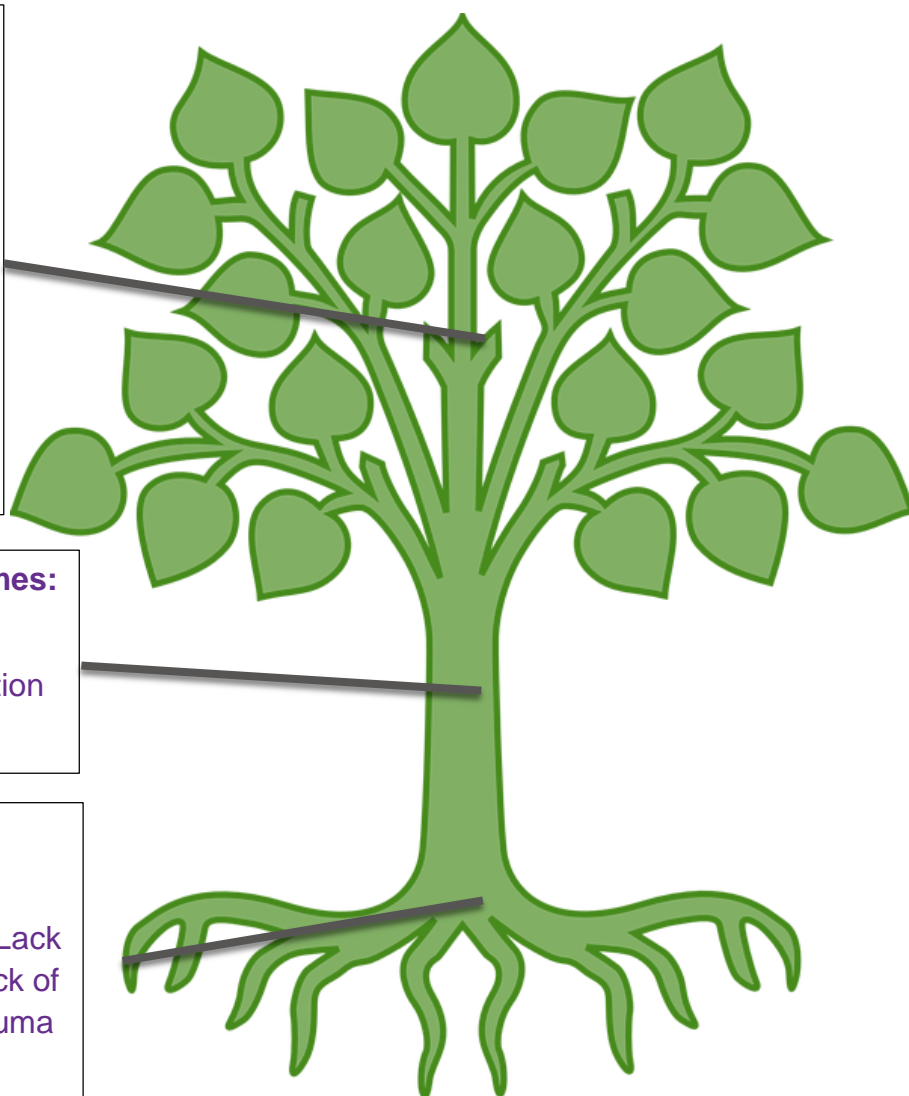
Diabetes • Obesity • Bipolar • Depression • Alcoholism • High blood pressure • Nicotine addiction • Drug addiction • Chronic pain • Cancer • Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) • Anxiety • Anger/aggression • Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Behaviors that lead to outcomes:

Nature deficit • Isolation • Unhealthy diet • Lack of motivation • Lack of exercise • Poor sleep

Root Causes:

Lack of sidewalks/pedestrian infrastructure • Lack of money • Lack of support • Unemployment • Lack of positive examples • Stress • Trauma • Too little time



Through a series of subsequent conversations about food security/insecurity and how they show up in the Amherst community, the following themes were identified:

1. A need for healthy food sources closer to home (primarily in the East Hadley Road area and downtown)
2. A need for alternatives to the bus to access food--particularly alternatives that can easily accommodate large quantities of groceries
3. The need for more recreational and gardening facilities at affordable housing properties--particularly South Point Apartments and Amherst Housing Authority properties
4. The need for coalitions of neighbors in affordable housing communities who can:
 - a. Advocate for the needs of residents
 - b. Organize ride shares
 - c. Welcome new neighbors and get them connected to resources
5. The desire to support local agriculture

In order to bring Amherst practitioners who were working on aspects of food insecurity into the conversation with Amherst residents, Healthy Hampshire initiated an Amherst Food Justice Planning Process in 2019. The process included 10 meetings—5 with residents alone and 5 with both practitioners and residents--and was driven by the following goals:

1. Result: Identify ways to increase food justice in Amherst
2. Process: Work slowly, carefully, and collaboratively with a focus on building relationships
3. Relationships: Foster connection and shared understanding across language and cultural differences

In addition to about 10 unaffiliated residents who attended each of the meetings, the following agencies and organizations were represented by practitioners who participated in the process:

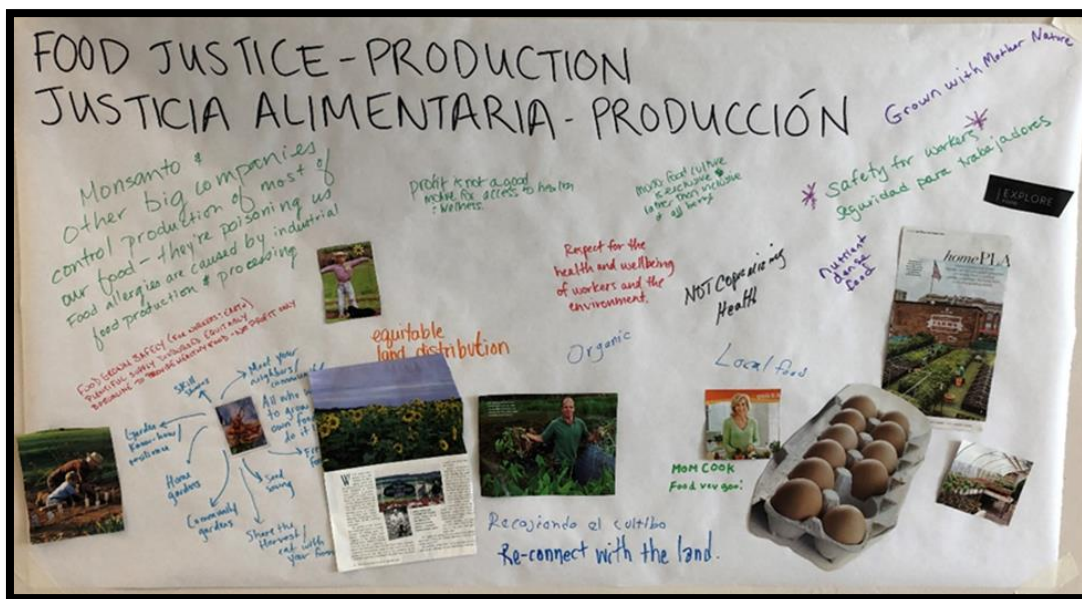
- The Amherst Survival Center
- The Center for Human Development's Family Outreach of Amherst
- The Collaborative for Educational Services
- The Common Share Food Co-op
- Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture (CISA)



- Cooley Dickinson Health Care
- The John P. Musante Health Center
- Massachusetts Farm to School
- Sociocracy for All
- The Town of Amherst Department of Conservation and Development and Senior Center
- Way Finders
- UMass Amherst

Definitions

The first step in the Amherst Food Justice Planning Process was to establish shared definitions for the terms we would be using throughout the process. This was achieved by putting the terms on the walls on butcher paper and allowing participants in the process to share their own understanding of what the terms meant through words, drawings, or images cut out of magazines. Below is a list of the terms, along with a list of the themes that emerged from this process for each term.

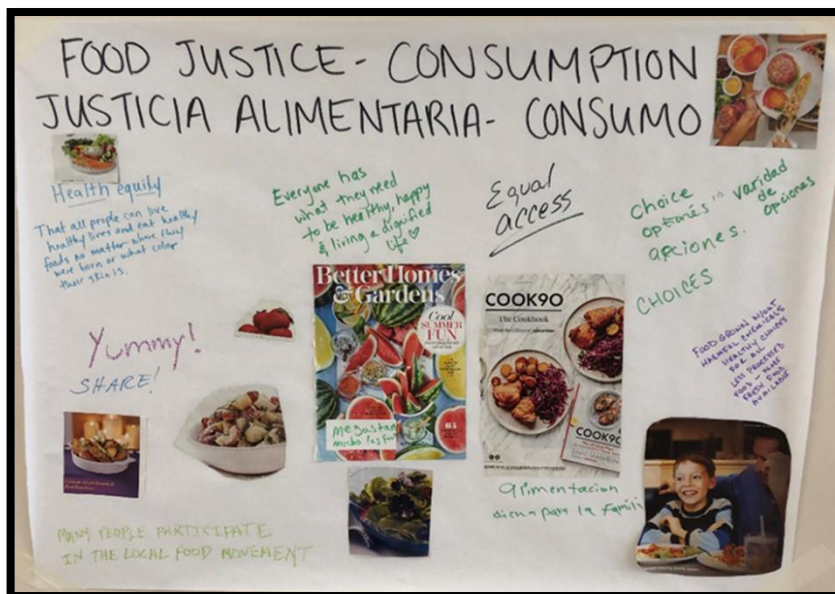
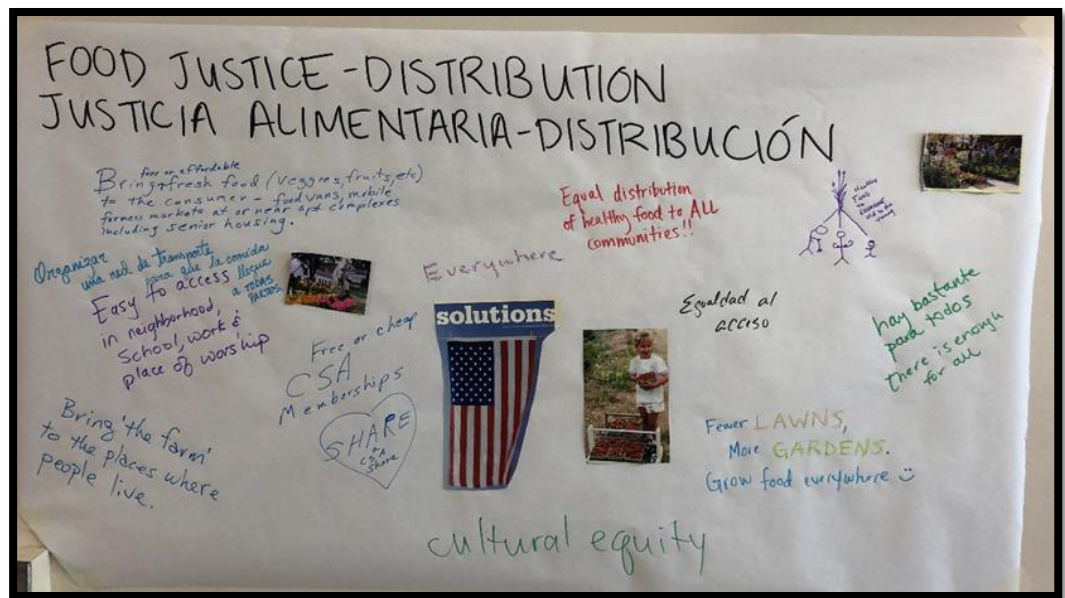


Food Justice- Production

- Growing food to support healthy people and a healthy planet, and not just to make a profit
- Growing enough food to feed all people in all places
- Being able to grow one's own food
- Connecting over food grown close to home

Food Justice- Distribution

- Bringing affordable, healthy food to the consumer
- Everyone is able to get the healthy food they need

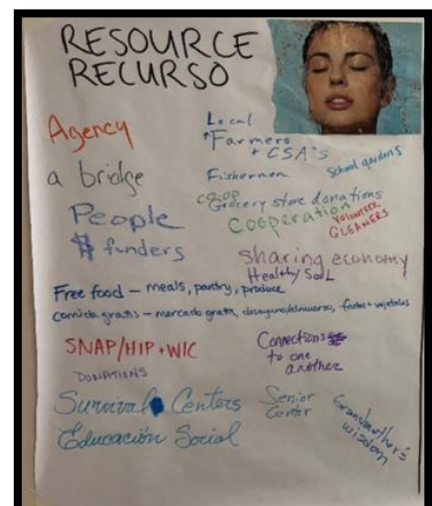


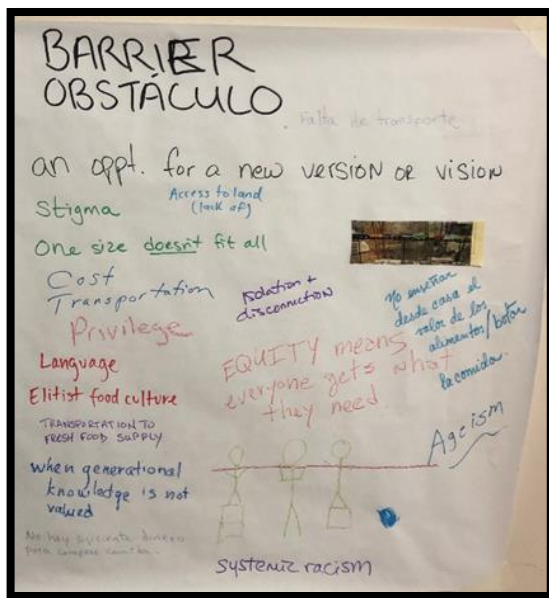
Food Justice- Consumption

- Everyone has equal opportunity to consume a diet that supports a healthy life
- People are able to choose what types of food they consume

Resource

- Donations
- Social service agencies
- Financial support
- Community members supporting one another
- Shared knowledge
- The things we need to produce food





Barrier

- Lack of transportation
- Not being able to afford healthy food
- Certain groups being excluded from getting what they need
- Disconnection from the knowledge and support each other has to share
- An opportunity for change

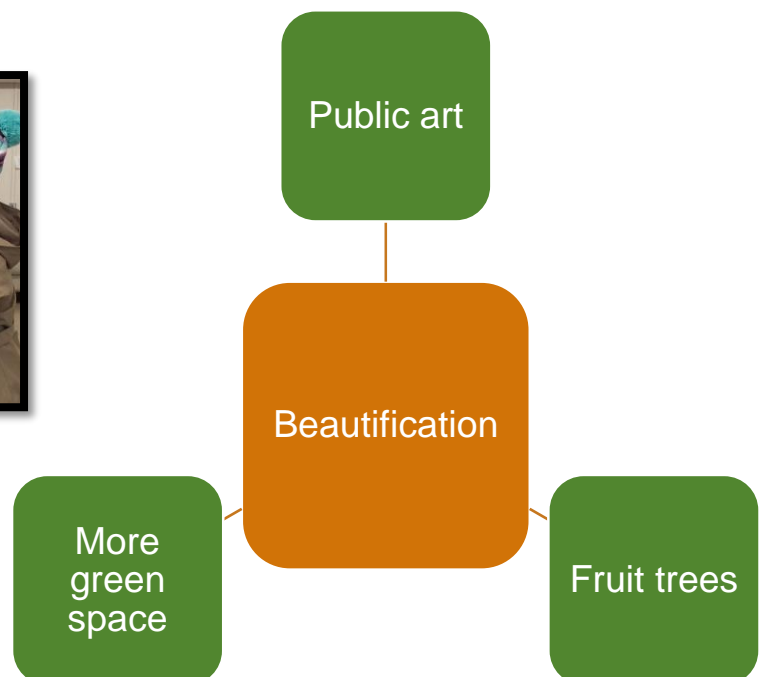
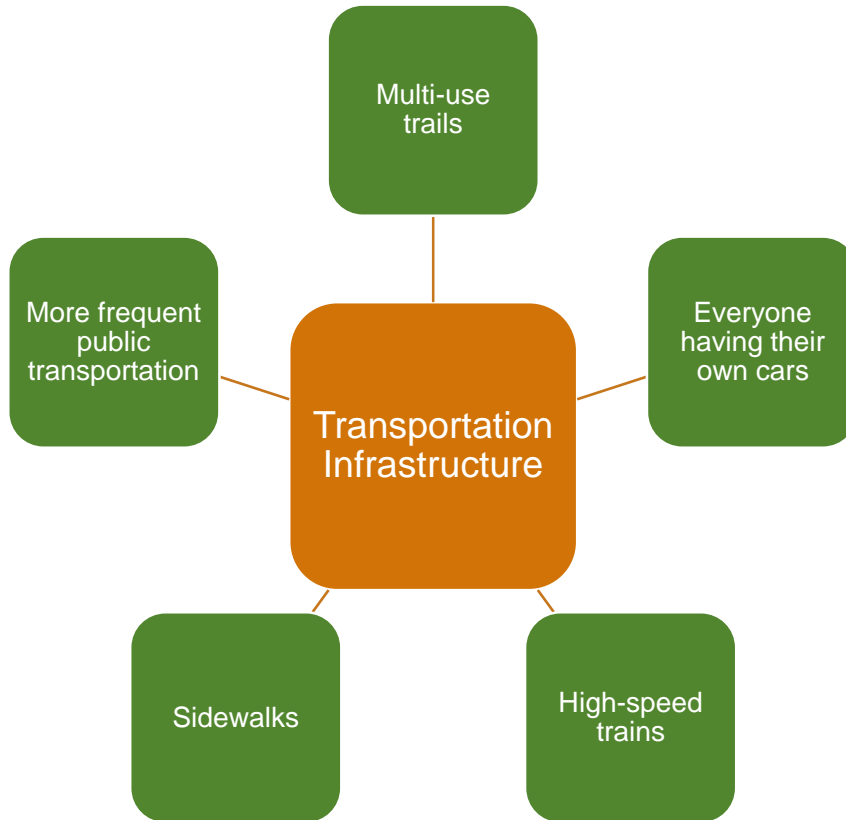


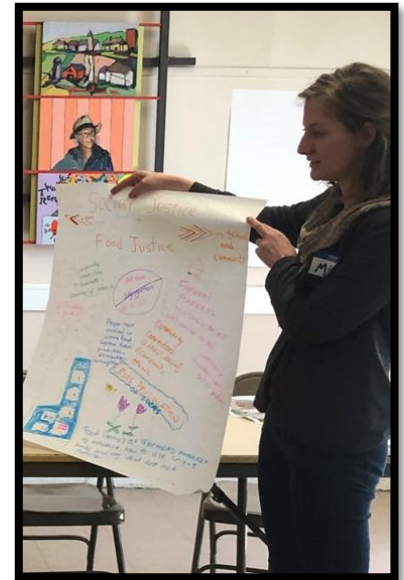
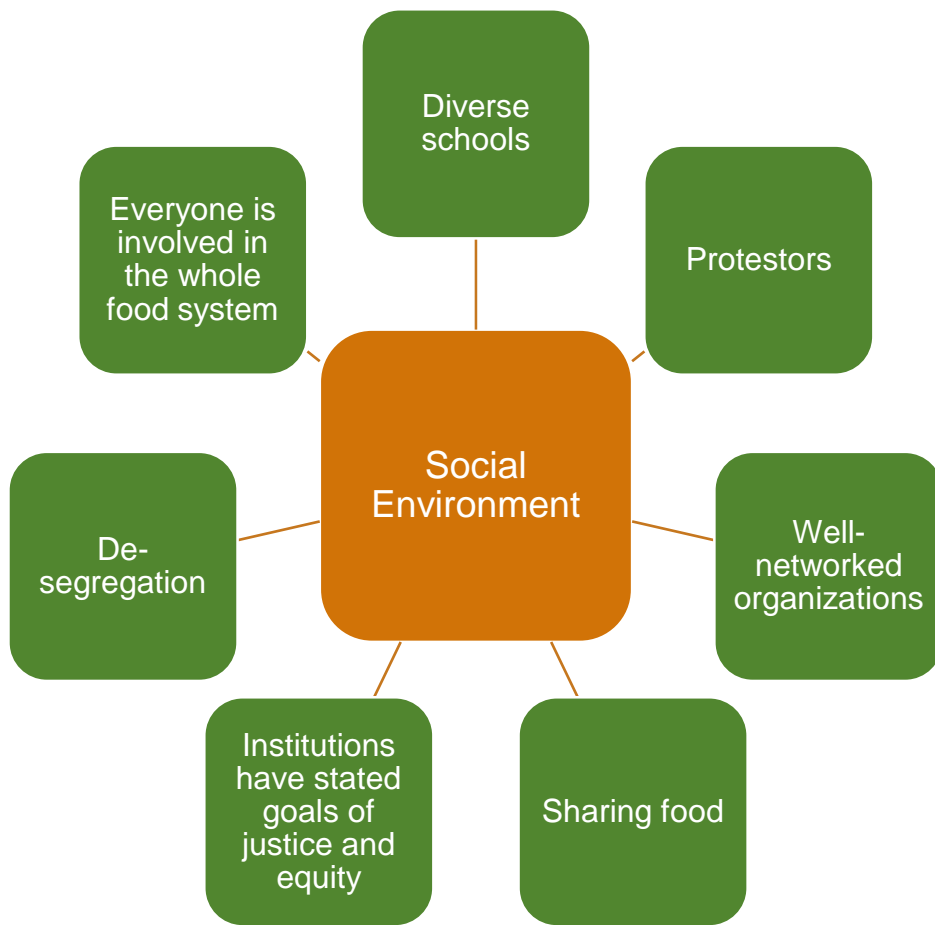
Community

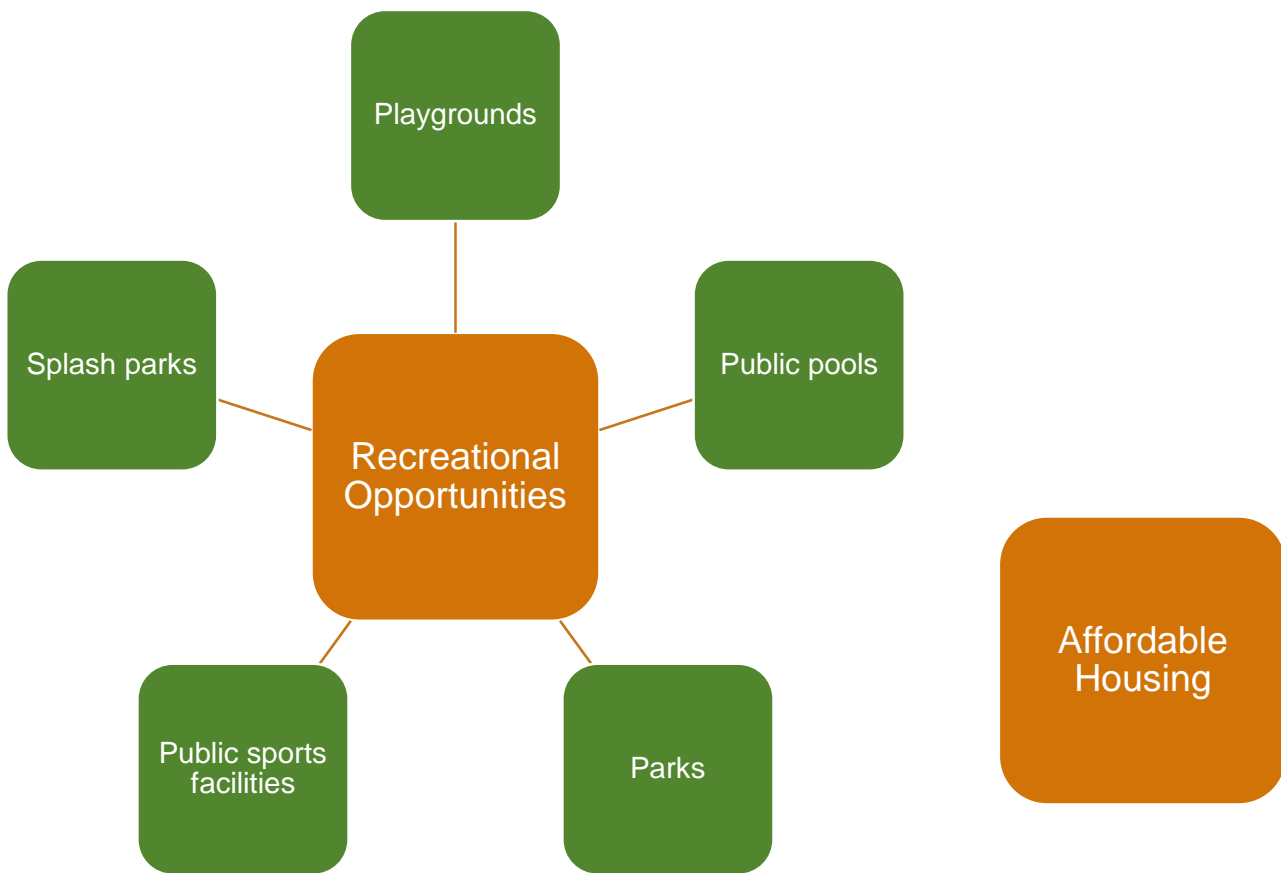
- Connection to the planet and everyone on it
- Welcoming all people: being open to learning, growing, and sharing together
- Feeling loved, accepted, and included
- Recognizing that we are stronger together

Neighborhood Visions

Participants were asked to create murals to represent the neighborhoods of their dreams. A number of themes emerged from the murals, loosely grouped into the below categories.







Challenges

The group identified the following challenges to accessing healthy food in Amherst:

1. Not enough money or time
 - 1.1. It is hard to afford healthy food
 - 1.2. Public transportation and work take up a lot of time and leave very little time for procuring healthy food
 - 1.3. Unemployment leaves little money for food
2. Infrastructure
 - 2.1. Sources of healthy food are not close enough to home (the vast majority of Amherst is a USDA designated food desert).

“I leave to go grocery shopping after I put my kids on the bus to school, and between the time spent traveling on buses and finding the best prices on the foods my kids will eat, it’s time to get them off the bus before I realize it.”
—Process participant

- 2.2. There are not enough buses that go to farms, markets, grocery stores, and the food pantry, or bus trips are long.
- 2.3. Carrying a lot of groceries makes it hard to take the bus because of physical limitations (individuals), bag limits (policy), and perishability of food over long bus rides (infrastructure).
- 2.4. Taxis are the best option for carrying groceries if you don't have a car, but they are expensive.
- 2.5. Pedestrian infrastructure is sparse or inadequate.
- 2.6. Property managers will not allow gardening at some housing complexes.
- 2.7. Food sources that are close to home are less healthy and expensive (gas stations, convenience stores).

"I have a convenience store near my house, but the milk is too expensive and I would rather go across town for a cheaper gallon of milk." –Process participant

- 2.8. Opening a new grocery store, such as the planned co-op, is hard work that takes a lot of time and money.
3. Help is not helpful enough
 - 3.1. There is a lot of competition for emergency food (long lines and wait times) and the hours that emergency food sources are available don't work for everyone.
 - 3.2. Large institutions that could help address challenges are not in touch with or responding to the needs of the community.
 - 3.3. Forms for getting benefits, such as free and reduced lunch, are complicated and need to be completed repeatedly in order to maintain benefits
 - 3.4. Benefits administrators do not provide enough information about how to access or take advantage of other food access programs
4. Society and culture
 - 4.1. People are disconnected from one another and that makes it hard to share knowledge and resources, especially across differences of race, ethnicity, and class.
 - 4.2. Systemic racism, language differences, immigration status, stigma, and lack of knowledge all prevent people from getting healthy food where it does exist.
 - 4.3. Stores that are accessible do not feel like good cultural fits or contain all the products needed to feed a family with picky kids on a tight budget.

Often you have to ignore rudeness or mistreatment from the store's employees when shopping for food."
–Process participant

- 4.4. There are class divisions and power imbalances in Amherst that prevent those in charge from being familiar with the challenges that exist around accessing healthy food, and prevent those who are experiencing challenges from being the people in charge.

“Amherst residents who want a good selection of Latino foods have to go to Holyoke, which takes two hours on the bus.” –Process participant

- 4.5. Trauma, chronic stress, and lack of support make it difficult to go out and get food.

Solutions

Based on the challenges the group identified, and discussions about possible solutions to those challenges, the following strategies from the Hampshire County Food Access Action Plan² appeared to be applicable in Amherst:

1. Food Policy Council

Establish a food policy council for Hampshire County or a subset of communities that prioritizes leadership from people who experience food insecurity in Hampshire County. Link with similar efforts in neighboring counties. Use the food policy council structure to:

- Support organizations and movements for and by low-income people that advocate for greater attention to the reality of who is poor and what they experience, with a particular focus on affordable housing tenant organizing efforts.
- Continue to build connections with people of color in Hampshire County, especially black and Hispanic/Latino residents, who experience disproportionately high rates of chronic disease, so that food access efforts are guided by and reflect their needs.

2. Mobile Market

² Plan Matrix available at: <http://www.healthyhampshire.org/content/6-resources/draft-action-plan-2.pdf>

Convene partners to develop plans and contribute funding to support a mobile market that would serve communities in need.

3. Community Gardens at Affordable Housing Complexes

Develop a comprehensive program of providing and supporting community gardens at affordable housing locations and larger apartment complexes. Pre-identify high priority locations for community gardens throughout Hampshire County. This process would have several steps, progressing from identifying general priority locations for community gardens to specific sites that meet gardening needs with adequate light, soil, water, and access.

4. Make it Easy to Walk to the Store

Prioritize pedestrian, and bicycle infrastructure improvements based on high priority food access locations.

5. Allow Grocery Bags on PVRTA

Work with the Pioneer Valley Transit Authority to increase capacity to carry grocery bags on buses, including exploring a program to create passes that allow people vulnerable to food insecurity to exceed grocery bag limits (for example, those who qualify for SNAP, people with mobility impairments, older adults, etc.)

6. Gardening at Housing Complexes

Adopt a zoning change that requires that larger apartment developments provide space that is dedicated for vegetable gardening by tenants. Zoning in most communities requires a minimum amount of “open space” for new developments, but it typically does not require that the open space be useful for gardening.

7. Promote Healthy Food Access at Housing Authority Sites

Work with Northampton, Amherst, and Belchertown Housing Authorities to identify any barriers to healthy food access at Housing Authority properties—for example, land use restrictions, access issues for food distribution partners, and space needs for shared facilities for meal prep, shared meals, bulk food storage, etc. Identify policies that need to be put into place or lifted to allow more healthy food access for residents.

The following solutions were also proposed based on challenges and priorities that appeared to be particularly salient in Amherst:

8. Meet with the PVRTA to discuss possible improvements to the Amherst bus system, including:

- Add or change bus routes so that there are two routes that circle between affordable housing complexes and Stop & Shop/Big Y in Hadley: one in North Amherst and one in South Amherst.
- Add an express bus route that goes back and forth from downtown Amherst to Stop & Shop/Big Y in Hadley and waits in between the two shopping centers for one hour in order to give shoppers time to shop and then get back on the bus without waiting for the bus to complete another route.
- Set up a “local food route” that circulates between local farms, farmers markets, and farm stands that accept SNAP (Food Stamps).
- Identify routes that best serve census blocks with low vehicle ownership and keep service levels the same for those routes over the summer (as opposed to the current practice of decreasing service outside of the UMass academic year).
- Set up a contract with an on-demand rideshare company--like Uber or a local taxi company--so that residents can schedule affordable on-demand rides through the PVRTA without needing a credit card or smartphone.

9. Food resources public information campaign

Gather comprehensive data on free and affordable food resources available in Amherst, publish a list or booklet, and develop a plan to disseminate the published material through several outlets including schools, churches, local businesses, and social service providers.

10. Tailor food retail opportunities for ethnically marginalized and resource-constrained groups

- Incorporate products and components into new retail opportunities--such as the anticipated Common Share Food Co-op or mobile market--that feel familiar to ethnically marginalized groups. For example, offer a wide variety of affordable, freshly-squeezed juices for residents from Latin American countries. Employ members of ethnically marginalized communities in the development and execution of these retail opportunities in order to support these goals.
- Incorporate affordable, healthy, convenient, kid-friendly product lines into the inventory of new retail opportunities so that parents who are constrained by

time, money, transportation, and picky eaters can easily feed their kids healthy meals.

11. MA Food Trust

Explore the potential of the Massachusetts Food Trust to support the opening of an affordable, full-service food retailer in downtown Amherst. A location on or close to UMass Amherst campus would be a second preferred option based on bus routes.

12. Community Orchard

Establish a community orchard close to the downtown area where residents are welcome to pick fruit from the trees at no cost.

13. Amherst Community Garden

Establish a large, centralized community garden with supports for low-income and marginalized residents, such as subsidized and accessible plots, translated signage and resources, and on-site access to tools and resources needed for gardening.

14. Incentives or assistance for affordable housing property managers to support community gardens

Develop a package of incentives and/or assistance offered through the town that could encourage and support private property managers of subsidized and affordable housing to establish community gardens with plots assigned to residents or to allow personal gardens in areas adjacent to units.

15. Home delivery from the Survival Center

Explore ways for the Survival Center to offer home delivery of client-selected products.

16. Municipal leadership opportunities for marginalized residents

Support an advisory committee of residents from marginalized groups to develop recommendations for making municipal engagement and leadership opportunities more accessible to marginalized residents.

17. Facilitate trauma-informed care

Organize trainings for social service providers who provide food or refer clients to food resources to encourage them to use a trauma-informed approach to their interactions with clients.

18. On-site playgrounds at affordable housing complexes

Provide incentives or supports for managers of affordable housing complexes to build and maintain on-site playgrounds so that children may play outside within a safe distance in order to give parents time and space to prepare home-cooked meals.

“Food is a personal and family decision--there is no ‘one size fits all’ approach. We have to help people find what works for them and their families.”

–Process participant

Thank you to the participants in the Amherst Food Justice Planning Process

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