



Report Presses for Food Policy

Some surprises come from 2-year survey of local eating habits

By Lisa Loving of The Skanner

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A new report on North and Northeast families' eating habits shows that, although more good-quality food is available than ever, many – if not most – are having trouble bringing it home.

Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon's Interfaith Food and Farms Partnership has released the report, "Everyone Eats! A Community Food Assessment for Areas of North and Northeast Portland," to identify local policy and community-based solutions to food insecurity and convince lawmakers to include the issue in city planning decisions.

"For over 10 years we have had conversations about food, justice and sustainability, and how those three things connect," said Project Director Jenny Holmes. "One of the things that kept emerging was the need for food to be considered part of state and local policies."

Ecumenical Ministries' small food and farms project staff and a group of volunteers worked for two years with government and community organizations to produce the food survey. You can read it online at http://www.emoregon.org/food_farms.php.

"We wanted to build the availability of neighborhood-based projects to improve food access, as well as policies to ensure that low-income households have the same access to fresh, local, culturally-appropriate food as the more privileged families have," Holmes said. "This report gives us a starting point for developing solutions and developing policies that had been considered in the past but needed more information behind them."

Census statistics show that, despite an increasing influx of high-income residents, North and Northeast neighborhoods have high rates of poverty — and hunger. In the three main zip codes analyzed in the EMO study — 97211, 97217, 97218 — more than 15 percent of residents are below the federal poverty line, with 5 percent on public assistance.

As part of the study process, the group recruited leaders from North and Northeast Portland "who understand food insecurity first-hand," including volunteers from Somalia, Mexico, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Russia.

Volunteers administered one-on-one surveys at food pantries, grocery stores, church congregations and apartment buildings. They collected responses from over 200 people in English, Spanish, Russian, and Somali.

Group-style "community conversations" about food issues were conducted in three different languages.

The report found that three-quarters of study participants from low-income households use the Oregon Trail food stamp program, yet 71 percent struggle to make their food budgets last to the end of the month.

Transportation to food outlets was named as a problem by 43 percent of participants. Twenty-five percent of those surveyed said they travel 30 to 90 minutes each way to reach their usual food store.

Thirty-six percent till a household or community garden plot, but only 12 percent buy food at farmers markets; many didn't know where the nearest farmers market was.

Holmes said part of the genesis for the effort was encouragement from Portland City Commissioner Dan Saltzman, who told the organizers that if they came up with sound policy ideas on the issue, he would work to incorporate them into city policy.

She said the report has been forwarded to the city Bureau of Planning, with an eye toward making food access central in the upcoming revamp of Portland's Comprehensive Plan. "We plan for parks, housing and transportation, but the most basic of human needs—access to healthy food—is often left out the planning equation," Holmes said.

The group also wanted to more directly engage low-income residents in developing the study and in creating new community food projects.

Innovative ideas already in place include projects to link urban households with small farmers.

The Interfaith Food and Farms Partnership started two years ago in Benton County with a food access survey and a coupon program connecting local farmers, congregations, and low-income residents. In 2007, the coupon program expanded, adding a cooking club for food pantry clients and low-income participants.

As part of the new study project, nine church congregations have created pilot programs where farm stands stocking produce from refugee and immigrant farmers are set up after-church, for congregation members as well as neighbors.

The project has also resulted in two community-supported agriculture pilot programs with subsidized shares for low income families.

For more information on the food programs, call Ecumenical Ministries at 503-221-1054.