

HEGEWISCH COMMUNITY AREA QUALITATIVE REPORT
Northeastern Illinois Community Food Security Needs Assessment
University of Illinois at Chicago and Hegewisch Community Committee

Summary of interview groups:

| Sector | Date | Number of Participants | Gender | Race/Ethnicity |
|---------------------------------------|-------------|-------------------------------|---------------|-----------------------|
| Retail Food Outlet 1 | 4.01.05 | 1 | M | White |
| Retail Food Outlet 2 | 4.01.05 | 1 | M | White |
| Community Members | 3.3.05 | 4 | M/F | White |
| Community Gardener | 5.2.05 | 1 | F | Unknown |
| Emergency Food Programs (Food pantry) | 4.11.05 | 6 | M/F | White |

Organization of Report The report begins with an overview and profile of the food sectors in Hegewisch whom served as interviewees for this analysis. A summary of study challenges and strengths is then presented followed by Key Findings.

The bulk of the report then details Emergent Themes. When a quotation from the interviews is provided, the quote is in italic followed by the name of the food sector and date of data collection.

KEY FINDINGS

INTRODUCTION A total of 9 major themes emerged across the five research interviews. These included:

Barriers to Food Assistance Programs

- Inconveniently located
- High demand for services
- Inconvenient times
- Embarrassment in accessing services
- Food offered is undesirable

Community Area Food Retail Outlets' Ability to Offer Healthy Food

- Access to food retail outlets
- Challenges of retail food outlet: Competition from chain stores
- Challenges of retail food outlet: Barriers to offering healthy foods choices
- Challenges of retail food outlet: Locally grown foods

Strategies to Access Food by Needy Community Residents

Threats to Family-level Food Security

- Sporadic employment
- Inadequate transportation
- Homelessness or inadequate housing

Potential Solutions

- Improve Transportation Options
- To Restrict Access to Emergency Food Programs to Only Eligible Residents

- To Improve Access to Healthy Food
- Improve the Variety of Healthy Food available at the food pantry

Vulnerable Groups

Strengths of Emergency Food Programs in Hegewisch

Barriers to Community Gardening in Hegewisch

Food Waste

FINDINGS BY EMERGENT THEMES:

Barriers to Food Assistance Programs

- **Inconveniently Located**

Across the interview data five issues were raised with respect to barriers to food assistance programs. First, transportation barriers were cited due to the fact that the food assistance programs are inconveniently located outside the neighborhood. The Public Aid, WIC and Food Stamp offices were reported to be very far away – about *40-50 blocks away*. WIC participants can use their food vouchers in Hegewisch, but have to go back to the WIC office to get additional ones. This is especially a problem if one has limited transportation options.

- **High Demand for Services**

Second, high demands of food assistance programs were named as a barrier. It was alleged that high demands were the result at least in part by misuse of services by those that are not in need. This results in longer lines compromising ease of access. Some of those who are perceived to be not in need of services come from outside the community and misrepresent themselves with an address in the community, that's not their own, to try to be eligible for food. Others take food from two different places, one in Hegewisch, one in a neighboring community.

Well, sometimes. I heard that certain people would come to our pantry in Hegewisch and go and pick up the same thing at St. Francis and I don't think that is fair. The same people getting twice? They should be happy getting once. But they'll come here, pick up their stuff, and go to St. Francis. Some way they should be checking on that, that they don't do that (Community Members, 3/3/05).

People, you know their faces here and they come over there and use somebody else's residence and show up and be like, "Okay, I'm signing up." And I, "Listen, I know where you live." And then some of them would leave and some of them would throw a fit and I'm like, "Okay, whatever, it's up to you (Community Members 3/3/05).

- **Inconvenient Times**

Food assistance programs hours were reported as inconvenient times with no weekend hours.

- **Embarrassment in Accessing Services**

It was suggested that a real barrier to the use of food assistance programs is embarrassment.

Facilitator: Have you heard of any other creative ways that people get food?

Female Voice: I think we might have somebody that might go to the rectory because they don't want to come on the day that we're giving out the food because they're embarrassed, so they might go to the rectory, [and have the priest find out] (Emergency Food Program, 4/11/05).

Despite feeling embarrassed, it was suggested that one should work to overcome these barriers.

When it comes to that, you can't be too humble. If you need it, you need it. (Community Member Interview, 3/3/05).

People become very proud, and sometimes they go without rather than wanting other people to know that they're in need, and that's an issue that we try to deal with, to make sure that people realize that, you know, we never know one day from the next if any of us are going to be in the same situation, and that is really hard. You have people coming the first time, they cry because they're so overwhelmed with the fact that they're in need. And that's kind of where our issue with treating people with dignity comes in because, you know, if you come in and you're rough to them, that's tough. They're having a hard time as it is (Emergency Food Program, 4/11/05).

- **Food Offered is Undesirable**

The last barrier identified involved the lack of desirable food available from the Food Depository. The food depository does not always provide the food that the food pantry wants to give people. The emergency food program attempts to match preferences but they are limited by financial constraints.

Hegewisch emergency food programs representatives who were interviewed reported that quality, variety and supply of foods items are a constant challenge. Food Pantry staff find that they often do have an inadequate supply and insufficient funds to purchase additional food. Some of the food that they get is spoiled or expired so they can't use it.

Facilitator: So do you think the Food Pantry contributes a lot to this community for people's needs being met?

Male Voice: Definitely, but never enough.

Female Voice: Never enough.

Female Voice: No.

Male Voice: You know, we give all we have --

Female Voice: [But it's not enough.]

Male Voice: All we have and it's never enough (Emergency Food Pantry interview, 4/11/05).

Community Area Food Retail Outlets Ability to Offer Healthy Food

• Access to Food Retail Outlets

There was some disagreement among the community members on the quality and variety of food at local retail outlets in Hegewisch. Only six community area stores were discussed two of which were located outside of Hegewisch. See Appendix A for detail. Some community members suggested that their neighborhood needed access to better quality, less expensive food and good quality meat. While street vendors are present in Hegewisch, they were not reported to be used as a regular source of food.

Retail Food Outlet Owners expressed efforts to provide, healthy culturally-appropriate foods to Hegewisch's Latino community members in two ways: hiring Latino employees and offering Hispanic food options.

• Challenges of Retail Food Outlet: Competition from Chain Stores

Some of the retail food owner representatives expressed concern with the viability of small stores.

The fact that we're here. Small stores like this one aren't out there anymore. They got eaten up and chased out by the big guys (Retail Food Outlet Interviews, 4/01/05).

These interviewees felt proud in the role they play and confident that despite the market pressure they provided a valuable service to the community including competitive pricing and despite limitations due to size of store, a variety of food items.

I think the store has a tremendous benefit to the community because if you look around, it's lacking in a lot of amenities. . . I think we are a conduit in many ways from having certain products in the community to not having them at all. There's nowhere else in this neighborhood where you can come in and buy food products, alcohol, have your donuts and coffee all at the same time. It's a one-stop type of shopping (Retail Food Outlet, 4/01/05).

It's a tight store, so you can't carry everything. We've only got four aisles. But, walk around out there, and you'll be surprised that there are an awful lot of items out there (Retail Food Outlet, 4/01/05).

• Challenges of Retail Food Outlet: Barriers to offering Healthy foods choices

Generally the retail food outlet representatives seemed to be pleased with the variety of healthy foods they were able to offer.

A lot of people don't know this, but we actually have a small section for fruits and vegetables. I personally go to the market every week and pick the product up fresh, so there's no middle man (Retail Food Outlet 2, 4/01/05).

We have fresh bananas and fresh oranges here every week, fresh apples, lettuce, cucumbers, tomatoes, garlic. During the season, we'll bring in mushrooms,

grapes, and cherry tomatoes. We don't carry greens because right now there's not the market to keep it. Because of the perishability, we bring in what sells right now. But, we have pears. We'll bring in nectarines in season (Retail Food Outlet 2, 4/01/05).

While these interviewees made an effective argument that they were doing all they could to provide healthy foods, they articulated some barriers to doing so. These included cost, competition, and store space limitations.

Cost

Our prices are as cheap as anybody in town, not just in this area. Our bananas are 59 cents a pound all year round. Big supermarkets will put them on sale for 29 cents; I can't match that because I'm buying a case at a time and they're buying 100 cases. But, they're here and they're fresh every week. So, there's no price gouging. Our oranges, tomatoes, cucumbers, and all our vegetables go with the marketplace. I make x amount on that, but it's usually at or cheaper than supermarkets. The people that shop here know that. I wish I could advertise that somehow where the rest of the town would know. As I said earlier, I don't take greens so I don't have a full vegetable section or fruit section. But, what I have here is fresh and it's priced in accordance with what supermarkets out there will have. Obviously, there's no supermarket in the area other than [XXX], we can honestly beat their prices here (Retail Food Outlet 2, 4/01/05).

Competition

Always competitive; whatever the market is out there, we're there or below it. There are certain things we have to keep cheaper here because we know our people need them. You have to be reasonable on bananas all the time because all the seniors, whether they like it or not, have to eat one a day (Retail Food Outlet 2, 4/01/05).

The Handcuffs of a Small Retail Food Outlet

When you talk about product food lines like boxed or canned foods, the biggest problem I have is finding a wholesaler that can give it to me at a good price. When you're dealing with small grocery stores, in the city right now, there are two major companies that deal with small grocers. Their prices are consistently higher than if I were able to go to Certified or Centrella or [Romney's]. Many times, I will see the bigger chains have something on sale cheaper than what I'm purchasing it for, and that's not fair. It's not just our store, but all these small grocery stores are really handcuffed. There should be no reason why we can't go out there and buy at a cheaper price, too.

That's a major barrier. If anything, I'd love for somebody to help us out and say, "Here's a bunch of warehouses where you can go get good products at a price where you can compete with these guys" . . . I think it would be a benefit to the community

because we'd have another store that's giving you an option. I know that if I got it at the same prices that the guy down the street did, I'd beat their price; I have no doubt. . . . But, I personally feel that a small grocer is at a complete disadvantage right now dealing with the bigger guys because many times, we have to buy something more expensive than what they're selling it for (Retail Food Outlet 2, 4/01/05).

- **Challenges of Retail Food Outlet: Locally grown foods**

While some retail food outlet owners are able to provide locally grown foods, they would be interested in selling more locally produced foods but only if they were high quality and low cost.

We do offer quite a bit of produce in the summer. We use a few different farms out between Lansing and Dyer. Some of these guys grow specifically for us, and with some of them we just shop their markets (Retail Food Outlet 2, 4/01/05).

I'd love it if someone came up to me and said, "Hey, you know, I've got a farm downstate. It's a half hour away. I can supply you with tomatoes for the summer." I'd go for it (Retail Food Outlet 2, 4/01/05).

Strategies to Access Food by Needy Community Residents.

Friends and families were cited as sources of supplemental food when one is experiencing food insecurity. Interview participants also reported seeing evidence of dumpster diving, prostitution, and stealing in order to access food.

I've heard of them taking out of the garbage can to eat, and I've heard of them taking out the garbage when they had money to buy food, and they still took out of the garbage (Community Member Interview, 3.3.05).

There are cases, and it would be only personal cases that most of the volunteer core would know, but, yes, the prostitution and the stealing and all of that, yes, we've had that. I've had people say that to me, on the side, that they had to resort to that. But, on the whole, dignity is a big issue, and most of them wouldn't even admit to the fact that they had to do any of those things (Emergency Food Program, 4/11/05).

Interestingly, retail store owners interviewed were not able to identify evidence of community food insecurity in their daily work. In fact the assumption was that *if they're [residents] not getting it, it's because they don't want it [food] (Retail Food Outlet, 4/01/05)*. However, overall they do participate in government programs such as Link or WIC.

Threats to Family-level Food Security

- **Sporadic employment**

The interview data suggest that several issues impact sustainable employment for community residents. These include residents being laid off from work or having seasonal work such as construction. Also it was reported that some residents with physical disabilities and/or limitations experience constrained employment opportunities. This prevents people from going to job

interviews. It was suggested that there is a lack of knowledge about work from home options for persons with physical limitations.

Female Voice: I think a lot of times it's job-related. Once they're out of work, it becomes a vicious circle, because once they're out of work, they're driving an older car, the car breaks down, now for job interviews, they have no way, except public transportation, but that becomes difficult too because if they need to find a job other than where public transportation takes them, they're caught in a catch-22. They don't have food to provide for their families, they can't work. And once the car breaks down, that's usually -- it's downhill. They really, really struggle, and jobs are really the biggest issue. People just either don't have jobs. A lot of times they're very lazy. A lot of times they're uneducated and unable to work. And many times, we find the single moms find themselves pregnant and unable to work, and have a couple other children, and they're really in a Catch-22 up (Emergency Food Pantry interview, 4/11/05).

- **Inadequate Transportation**

Unlike some other Chicago community areas included in this food security assessment, it was reported that many of the food retail outlets are not accessible by walking. One store was reported in walking distance but its quality and cleanliness were questionable. Concerns were expressed about the possibility of CTA cutting down the bus service in neighborhood and limited CTA routes in community.

- **Homelessness or Inadequate Housing**

Hegewisch's homeless and/or those residents without proper cooking facilities or electricity cannot make use of food that needs to be prepared or refrigerated. In fact, homeless residents often need to carry their food with them. As such they need canned fruit (with pop-tops) or other food that doesn't need to be heated. This is important for emergency food pantry staff to consider in meeting resident's needs.

Male Voice: Here's another thing -- we have food, we can give them all the food they want, but if they don't have a house or they don't have electricity, what is a can of soup going to do? You know? Some of the new ones, even if you have the pop tops on them -- you know, you pull the top -- they still need to heat it up

Female Voice: That's true.

Male Voice: [Or they're eating it cold.]

Male Voice: So, I mean, we're giving them . . . a lot of the new cans, like of fruit and stuff, just pop-up lid, so we've already given people who have no place, no house, no electricity -- I just stuff in cans and cans of fruit, with the pop tops on them. They can eat that with their fingers right out of the can, anywhere (Emergency Food Pantry interview, 4/11/05).

Potential Solutions

Several solutions were proposed by interview participants to improve food security in Hegewisch.

- **Improve Transportation Options**

Interview participants offered solutions to the transportation challenges. These include a *transportation system for seniors and people with disabilities (Community Member Interview, 3/3/05)*, an employment program for the physically disabled to work at home and a free bus system.

Male voice: Then, I know in Indiana, when I lived out in a little town, they had a little bus system that if people were immobile or their vehicles were broken down, they would drive you. It was almost like CTA. If you couldn't afford it, they would like you ride for free. It was just volunteer. You could pay if you wanted, or if not you don't have to. They would take you to the grocery stores and wait while you paid for the groceries (Community Member Interview, 3/3/05).

- **To Restrict Access to Emergency Food Programs to Only Eligible Residents**

The food pantries don't have the capacity to systematic verify residence. Some interview participants suggested the incorporation of some controls similar to those in place for the Christmas Wish Tree program in which gifts are delivered to the families' residences.

- **To Improve Access to Healthy Food**

Cost was discussed as a major barrier to accessing healthy food. Interview participants, particularly community members suggested that a reduction in the price of healthy food could facilitate access.

Well, if they have to pay the high prices, they're not going to get healthy food. But if they had more, they could get, maybe, a little cheaper, they'd probably think about it (Community Member Interview, 3/03/05).

Yeah, that's a lot with us, is with the price of it (Community Member Interview, 3/03/05).

But instead of getting something that might be healthy, it's a lot cheaper and easier to just go and get a peanut butter and jelly sandwich or something (Community Member Interview, 3/03/05).

- **Improve the Variety of Healthy Food available at the food pantry**

Maybe get them a better variety of foods every time they went to the pantry so they don't get the same pasta and tortillas or something every month (Community Member Interview, 3/03/05).

Foods of a better variety. Like the old saying, steak is great, but if you eat it every day for a year, you get sick of it (Community Member Interview, 3/03/05).

Vulnerable Groups

Those identified by the interview participants as most vulnerable to food insecurity include low income, homeless, and those residents generally struggling financially. Some examples of people with representative of these populations are single moms, divorced individuals, one parent income, seniors and undocumented individuals.

Nothing is more disheartening than when you hear a senior say they had to choose between their medicine and their food. That really is scary. They take their prescriptions and they cut them in half -- they only take half of what the prescribed amount is so that they're able to still pay their bills or still be able to do that, and that's kind of tough. They are the most vulnerable -- our seniors and are disabled (Emergency Food Program, 4/11/05).

Interviewees identified the need for a senior meal program and soup kitchen to serve vulnerable seniors in Hegewisch.

Strengths of Emergency Food Programs in Hegewisch

Across the research interviews several strengths were articulated with respect to the emergency food programs in Hegewisch. These include their ability to serve a large volume needy people; the fact that they are faith-based; and that they address comprehensive needs sometimes offering clothing or pots and pans to participants. The staff are perceived to work efficiently and serve people with dignity.

The emergency food pantry staff acknowledges this reputation.

. . . all of us together have just made this work because the people -- when they come in, they say -- they have told us -- that they have gone to other Pantries, and they don't get the same feeling when they come to our Pantry. They feel welcome, warmed, and loved (Emergency Food Pantry, 4/11/05).

Interviews with emergency food pantry staff revealed that they desire to serve more people and more often and broaden service delivery to provide rental and utility assistance to needy. Also staff would like to rotate food items at food depository to reduce the amount of waste associated with the reoccurrence of the same food items.

Barriers to Community Gardening in Hegewisch

Several reasons were articulated as to why community gardening may not be an effective strategy to improve food security. These include that the community is aging and older people have more restriction in terms of gardening. Also younger residents are more transient and mobile and are as such not drawn to gardening which requires a commitment to a geographic space for a period of time.

Interviewer: Why do you think there aren't, community gardens like that in Hegewisch?

Female Voice: (Barking dogs) because, lot of older people who live there maybe too old, you know, I mean their older and can't maybe they can't get around as

well. The neighborhood has changed there are people, I think as the older people die out it becomes more transient to some degree, I really don't know, I think maybe just stay out just because there is new people coming and going. You don't really know your neighbors as you use to (Community Gardener, 5/2/05).

Waste of Food

Both Retail Food Outlet representatives and those of the Emergency Food Pantry were interviewed with respect to how expired or damaged food products are handled. Retail Food Outlet interviewees reported that leftover food are either donated to food pantry, traded back to wholesalers, taken home for personal consumption or thrown away in order to avoid liability issues. If an item is close to its expiration date, or dented (but not leaking) it may be returned to the wholesaler. Expired products are thrown away. Products that are slightly damaged but safe to eat are often consumed by the retail food outlet owners themselves.

Further, many times the food that is acquired from the food depository is spoiled and needs to be thrown out. This includes valuable food items such as fresh meat and produce.

Female Voice: Well, what this is this is not the regular program with the Food Depository, it's the food rescue program, which is perishable foods, and we get it so reasonable that we have to go through it, even though they receive it, and when they receive it, it's on the date -- it's coded -- we have to give it out on that date, but some of those things had just kind of not quite made it through that date, and then we have to kind of go through them. But, on the whole, from that program, we have gotten some really good produce (Emergency Food Program, 4/11/05).

STUDY STRENGTHS Food sector representatives were interviewed in a familiar community location. Community Member interviews and Emergency Food Program interviews were held at the Hegewisch Community Committee. Retail Food Outlet interviews were conducted in the respective stores. All participants contributed equally in the interview with the exception of one elderly female who contributed only minimally in the community member interview.

STUDY LIMITATIONS All the participants in the Hegewisch Community Food Security Assessment were Caucasian limiting the representativeness of the findings for minority residents. While African American residents comprise less than 2% of Hegewisch's population, Hispanics account for 28% of the community. One organization was interviewed as the representative of the Community Based Organization, Farmers Market, Community Gardener and Food Security Advocate sectors limiting the range in opinions that may exist across these food sectors. No restaurant representatives were included in the study. Three of the four community members completed the community member interview.

Appendix

| Interest in Working together on Community Food Security Issues by Food Stakeholder Group | | | |
|--|-----|----|--------------------------------------|
| Group | Yes | No | Barriers to Involvement/ Comments |
| Retail Food Outlet 1 | Yes | | |

| | | | |
|---------------------------------------|-----|----|---|
| Retail Food Outlet 2 | Yes | | |
| Community Members | Yes | No | Too busy to find time |
| Community Gardener | | | |
| Emergency Food Programs (Food pantry) | Yes | | Yeah, to better serve the community, that would be great. |