

THE FUTURE OF FOOD SECURITY IN STARK COUNTY County Assessment and Strategic Framework for Change

A Project of the Stark Community Foundation



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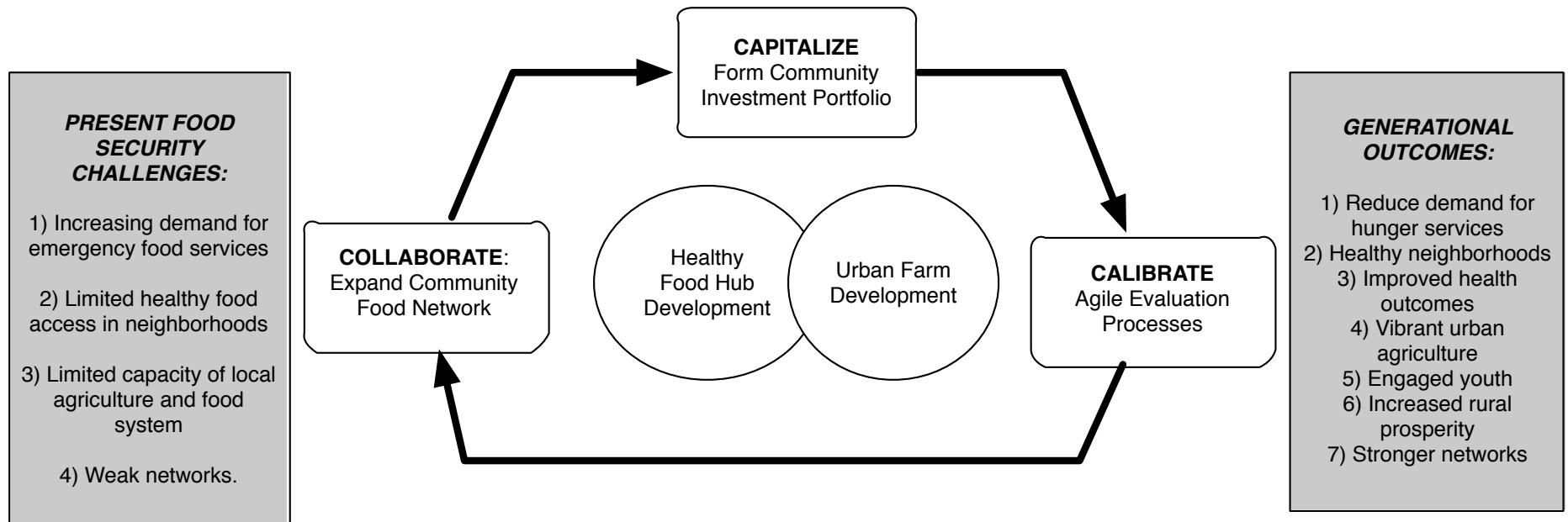
Prepared September 2014

THE FUTURE OF FOOD SECURITY IN STARK COUNTY--- BRIEF OVERVIEW

Stark County faces continuing food security challenges. Emergency food relief agencies report **a continuing demand for emergency food services** despite improvements in economic indicators for the county over the past three years. **Access to healthy foods** in food programs or neighborhoods is limited in the county. There are **few economic or social linkages between urban rural communities**, despite a strong and diverse agricultural production base. **Collaborative networks around food security** are under-developed, limiting capacity for long-range and systemic responses to food security needs.

In response, we propose **three areas of capacity development** that will help to facilitate a more comprehensive and long-term solution to hunger and food security challenges. The groundwork for this process has already been laid through the support of the Stark Community Foundation. The three part process includes **development of a community food network** to facilitate a stronger, more diverse, and better connected network among stakeholders who can impact food security. This network can utilize a **Community Investment Portfolio** to better track the assets that different stakeholders can bring to support food security efforts, including land to grow food, networks of farmers or businesses, political influence, financing, or under-utilized buildings or equipment. The Community Investment Portfolio will also identify gaps or areas where capital can be cultivated to better address food security challenges. A process of calibration and feedback allows the network to **evaluate, learn, adapt, and grow** in its capacity to impact key hunger issues, continuously evolving its efforts through an agile process. Based on community interest, this three-part process can initially be directed toward the formation of **a healthy local food hub** and establishment of an **urban farming initiative**. Mastering this process will build capacity and confidence to address these and other future challenges.

The good news is that Stark County possesses the assets needed to support this. From well-organized and experienced hunger organizations, established educational and health care institutional, rich urban and rural land, philanthropic resources, and a diverse base of local agricultural production, Stark County can improve its capacity to build a food secure future through better connections between people and assets. This framework is intended to build on these assets to support more healthy and connected communities that can: **reduce demand for hunger services, build healthier neighborhoods, support a more vibrant urban agriculture, engage youth and local schools, promote rural prosperity, and weave stronger networks.**





KEY FINDINGS AND STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS

Through the support of the Stark Community Foundation, the key findings listed below resulted from a 6 month process that included grant report reviews, stakeholder interviews, stakeholder surveys, network mapping, census data analysis, literature review, and community forums and meetings.

The key findings include coverage of:

- **Food Security Challenges**- key drivers, health impacts, and agricultural capacity
- **Food Security Networks and Response Capacity**- organizational review, survey results, network mapping
- **Future of Food Security**- summary of results of community forums and participatory meetings
- **Strategic Framework**- review of recommended core capacities and flagship projects



FOOD SECURITY DRIVERS IN STARK COUNTY

Food insecurity, an indicator of the reliability of access for the foods needed for a healthy diet, is a rising challenge in Stark County that grows independent of improvements in employment numbers. This food security challenge presents a community health challenge and indicates a change in the dynamics of poverty.

- An estimated 15.3% of the population of Stark County (57,730 people) and 23.8% of children (20,650) are considered food insecure.
- Hunger and meal programs report a continuing increase in demand for hunger services over the past 3 years, with 95% of agencies reporting an increase and 65% reporting a major increase.
- This food security challenge translates into a significant health challenge, with 59% of community stakeholders reporting that they saw evidence of severe medical or malnutrition risks due to inadequate diet, and 28% seeing a major risk.
- Food relief agencies report that the primary drivers for individuals seeking food relief are mostly economic (59%). Medical issues (15%), familial instability (10%), and homelessness (3%) also played roles.
- Underemployment (people working, but unable to meet life expenses) is the number one cause for individuals to seek food assistance (32%) and unemployment is second (27%).
- This is confirmed by broader statistics, which indicate that the unemployment rate has dropped to 7.1% (down from 13.2% in 2010), but 15% of residents still confront hunger.
- Food insecurity is tied to poverty. Hunger organizations report seeing “new faces of poverty”, indicating a rise in individuals seeking food relief that have never done so before, including formerly middle class families or people that are employed.

HEALTH IMPACTS OF FOOD INSECURITY

The strong interest and recognition of the need for healthy food is limited by access and availability. Food pantries and retail food options in neighborhoods have limited availability of healthy foods and farmers' markets have limited availability throughout the county. The lack of healthy food access has a health care cost with increasing rates of obesity in the county.

- Food relief programs show a strong interest in improving healthy food choices, with 81% actively working to increase nutritious food offerings.
- However more than half (54%) of food relief programs report a limited mix of nutritious foods with 29% reporting that nutritious foods are sporadic.
- The Center for Disease Control estimates that about 70% of Stark County adults can be considered overweight or obese in 2011 (compared to 64% in 2007).
- The Ohio Department of Health reports that for the 2009-10 school year, 34% of third-graders were overweight or obese (compared to 33.5% for 2004-05).
- The rise in obesity rates is one of the leading drivers of increased health care costs. This impacts low-income populations disproportionately.
- The US Department of Agriculture describes “food deserts” as areas where there is limited access to healthy food in neighborhoods. This includes census tracts where at least 100 households are located more than .5 miles from a grocery store AND lack access to a vehicle. By these measures, there are significant food deserts in the urban centers of Canton, Alliance, and parts of Massillon.
- Rural food deserts also present a challenge, according to a report by Ohio State University. Mapping indicates stretches of southern and northeastern Stark County that lack access to grocery stores.
- While there is some availability, healthy food access can be improved in food relief programs and neighborhoods.
- Food and hunger stakeholders reported some, but limited access to healthy foods throughout Stark County, with 40% seeing only some availability and 8% seeing limited availability.
- In terms of farmers' markets, 53% saw some, but limited availability throughout the county.

AGRICULTURAL CAPACITY IN STARK COUNTY

Stark County has one of the most productive and diverse agricultural bases in the state of Ohio, despite being the 7th most populous county. However, this base is threatened, as the rate of loss of farmers and farmland has outpaced the rate of loss in Ohio as a whole. Because of its heavy urban populations, Stark County has the purchasing power to increase market opportunities for agricultural communities in the county. However, there is little overall economic connection between urban centers and rural communities in Stark County today.

- Stark County is an urban-influenced county, with mid-sized urban centers in the northern and central portion of the county (Canton, Massillon, Canal Fulton, Alliance).
- With 375,586 residents, Stark County is the 7th most populous county in Ohio.
- Stark County has some of the most productive agricultural land in the county, being in the top 50% of 88 counties in all but one agricultural category.
- Relative to Ohio, Stark County was ranked in 2007 in the top 10% in five agricultural production categories (vegetables, poultry/eggs, hay, milk/dairy, other animal products, and fruits/trees/nuts/berries).
- The average farm size in Stark County is 116 acres compared to 185 average acres in Ohio. Farms are about 1/3 smaller in Stark County, indicating a base of smaller and mid-scale farm operations.
- The majority of farms are between 10-179 acres in size in Stark County, but have shown a general decline over the past 20 years.
- The only farms that have increased in numbers in 20 years are those that are between 1 to 9 acres and those that are 1,000 acres or more in size. Mid-size farms (50-499 acres) have shown overall decline.
- Stark County has a less stable agricultural base than Ohio, having lost 11% of its farms from 1987 to 2012 compared to a 5% loss of farms in Ohio.
- The land area devoted to agriculture dropped by 11% in 25 years compared to a 7% loss in the state of Ohio as a whole.
- Vegetable production has shown a significant decline in Stark County, moving from about 2,040 acres in 1987 to 900 acres in 2012. The share of Stark County's vegetable production for Ohio dropped from 4% in 2002 to about 2.5% of vegetable acres today.
- The residents of Stark County collectively purchase \$925 million in food annually. Canton, as the largest urban center in Stark County, accounts for 20% of this consumption (\$180 million).
- Households spend \$98 million annually on meat and eggs, \$54 million on dairy products, and \$94 million on fruits and vegetables—all significant agricultural production areas in Stark County.

FOOD SECURITY NETWORKS AND RESPONSE CAPACITY

There is evidence of an overall need to improve network collaboration and connectivity, including more connections between leaders in key sectors, greater interaction between faith-based and non-faith-based groups, the inclusion of diverse ethnic groups, and greater urban and rural connectivity. The inability to effectively collaborate is a common concern among many food security stakeholders. Despite this, there is a high degree of interest in collaborating or actively convening projects in the food security network. Network building activities might emphasize greater connectivity between emergency food relief, community education, healthy food access, and community development in the local food system.

Overview of Organizations:

- Of 15 food security stakeholders interviewed, almost half (47%) focus strictly on emergency food relief, including community distribution and meal preparation.
- Other capacities for addressing food security, including community education, healthy food access, and community development, had less coverage. Two organizations (13%) combined emergency food relief with education or other social services. Two organizations (13%) focused on healthy food access in low-income neighborhoods and two organizations (13%) focused on community development in the local food system. About 4 organizations (27%) covered 3 or more areas in their work.

Survey Responses:

- Among stakeholders responding to the food security survey, 45% focus on urban communities 50% said they serve a mix of urban, rural, and suburban communities.
- In terms of scale, 16% of stakeholders work region-wide, 33% county-wide, 15% city-wide, and 36% are neighborhood-based.
- In terms of organization types, 59% are faith-based, 24% are non-profit, 11% are social service, and 6% educational institutions.
- The overall food security network is somewhat siloed with little interaction between faith-based and non-faith-based groups.
- More women than men participate in food security efforts and there is good gender balance and mixing among key leaders.
- The ethnic base of stakeholders was 93% Caucasian, 4% African-American, and 3% mixed. This does not match demographic distributions in Stark County, especially in urban centers where most food assistance services are offered.
- Among stakeholders interviewed, the most commonly expressed concern about the future of food security efforts in Stark County is a lack of collaboration between food security groups. Common examples included a lack of collaborative projects, geographical divisions, turf battles, and a sense of competition for limited funds.
- Stakeholders show a strong willingness to collaborate with others, with 36% saying they are very willing and 38% saying they are somewhat willing. Those most willing to collaborate were among the core of the network. Those on the periphery with fewer connections were less interested in collaborating.
- For convening, stakeholders show high leadership potential with 43% either actively convening or willing to convene groups around food security projects and 25% being somewhat willing.



NETWORK MAPPING ANALYSIS

Network mapping is a process to determine the strength of relationships within a target group of stakeholders. Hunger networks show a fair degree of connectivity. Addressing food security comprehensively will require a greater degree of connectivity between hunger organizations and others that can provide additional supports or sources of local, healthy foods.

- Three sectors provide capacity for addressing food security: hunger (food pantries, meal programs, food banks), local food (local farms, urban gardens, local food businesses), and supporting organizations (health care, educational institutions, foundations, government agencies).
- The hunger network is the most developed. A dense core indicates a number of leaders with connections to peripheral groups. However, the network is vulnerable, with a small number of people serving as the main connectors to others.
- Supporting and local food sectors have much less developed networks with no evidence of a core and scattered connections.
- Combined, the three sectors demonstrate a high degree of siloing with few connections between the three of them. Supporting organizations do appear to provide a potential “bridging” role between individuals involved with hunger and local food.



FUTURE OF FOOD SECURITY

Emphasizing work in expanding core capacities and catalytic projects can lead to generational changes regarding food security. A community forum of stakeholders favored core capacities that could potentially be enhanced through a Community Food Network (facilitate network strength, asset development, and collaboration) and Community Education (build individual capacities for health, entrepreneurship, food preparation, and food production). Catalytic projects that can build local capacity to address food security and grow the local food economy include growth of urban agriculture in urban centers and establishment of a local food hub to foster farmer connections and provide critical local food system services, including warehousing, food processing, and food distribution.

- A July 9th community forum brought together the three key sectors involving 75 participants. This provided the first event where interactions between all three sectors were encouraged and collaborative projects first identified.
- Long-term visions for a more healthy and food secure future in Stark County emphasize improved health outcomes, expanded educational programs, improved healthy food access, and a stronger local food system.
- Two year benchmarks to measure progress toward these larger generational changes include collaborative processes, access to capital, growth in urban agriculture, improved farmer connections, improved public awareness, stronger school education, improved hunger relief delivery, better health outcomes, and productive infrastructure for local food systems.
- Shorter term projects that can make steps toward these two year indicators include facilitating development of urban gardens and farms, forming a community food network, developing school-based curricula, public awareness campaigns, reaching out to local farmers, increasing local food in food relief programs, nutrition and cooking programs, composting initiatives, and development of facilities for food storage, processing and distribution.

STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK FOR FOOD SECURITY

Based on a review of the results of interviews, surveys, network mapping, and community input, we recommend development of a strategic framework that focuses on strengthening networks, community asset development, and evaluation processes. These core capacities can initially be directed toward the development of a Healthy Local Food Hub and an Urban Farming initiative.



The background image shows a community food hub or market. In the foreground, there are people, including a child in a blue shirt and a person in a red shirt. In the middle ground, there are wooden tables with various items, including a large orange box labeled "sweet & juicy" and "Oranges". In the background, there are shelves stocked with food items, and a sign that says "Alliance Com" and "Working To End Hunger". The ceiling has a large white fan and fluorescent lights.

COMMUNITY NETWORK DEVELOPMENT

Key Strategies for building network capacity include cross-sector collaboration, encouragement of leadership development, and improvement of the network periphery.

Cross-Sector Collaboration:

- Organize gatherings (similar to the July 2014 forum) with the three key food security sectors that encourage opportunities for people to get to know each other, learn from innovative local examples, and identify collaborative initiatives.
- Identify key hubs (highly connected individuals) in each sector and have informal meetings to develop strategies for how to connect the three sectors. This can take the form of a “Community Food Network” or “Food Policy Council”.
- Develop a communications plan that includes newsletters, a community blog, a Facebook group, or webinars of interest to all three sectors.
- Support pilot working groups with representation for all three sectors. Projects that address urban gardening, healthy food in food deserts, and connecting farmers and consumers can draw a diverse mix of stakeholders from all three sectors.

Encourage Leadership Development:

- Offer network leadership training to a small group that includes individuals from all three sectors. They can learn skills for making more network connections, think about tools for network action (loan pools, communications), or leadership for cross-sector projects.
- Support cross-sector projects (such as food hubs or urban agriculture efforts) and provide facilitated peer community learning or coaching for these projects.

Building a Larger Periphery:

- Extending out of the county to identify other projects in Northeast Ohio, the state of Ohio, the mid-west or nationally can provide ideas and innovations for key projects, such as a food hub or an urban farming initiative.
- Formalizing network connections with Athens and Cleveland can help to provide useful models and learning around urban agriculture and food hub and incubator development.
- Focusing outreach to involve communities of color, low-income communities, or clients receiving food assistance will be a critical aspect of improving the network periphery and insuring that programs respond to those most impacted by food security challenges. Some of these people can also be contributors to the growth of the local food economy through education, workforce training, or entrepreneurship.



COMMUNITY ASSET DEVELOPMENT

Key strategies for building community assets to address food security locally include adopting a wealth creation model, encouraging collective impact philanthropy, and fostering local investment tools.

Wealth Creation Model:

- Organize a community asset portfolio that lists the forms of capital that can be leveraged in the community to better address food security.
- Emphasize processes to better connect and leverage existing resources in the community to build individual capital (skill-building and education), social capital (networks and volunteerism), and knowledge capital (innovation and research).
- Work through a Community Food Network to fill out a matrix of forms of capital that can be leveraged and forms of capital that need to be cultivated to support a local food hub and an urban farm development, including commitments from stakeholders that can supply capital.

Collective Impact Philanthropy:

- Encourage events (like the July 9th forum) that provide an opportunity for funders, non-profits, businesses, and other community stakeholders to work toward a shared vision and priorities.
- Initiate collaborative funding projects that can spread benefits across multiple stakeholders, including training or capacity building for network collaboration, or urban farm development funds to support growth of urban gardens and farms.
- Provision of funding by local foundations to build collaborative projects that can increase the capability of Stark County to attract state or national philanthropic or government funding support.

A person wearing a red t-shirt is shown from the side, focused on cooking. They are holding a metal strainer filled with green beans over a large, dark metal pot. In the background, a large red kitchen scale is mounted on a wooden wall. The scene is set in a rustic kitchen environment.

CALIBRATION AND FEEDBACK

Calibration and feedback includes development of external and internal feedback tools that can help to gauge progress and adapt initiatives to changing circumstances.

External Feedback Tools:

- Leverage the Community Food Network to identify institutions in Stark County that can play a role in program evaluation, including cooperative extension, universities, or health care institutions.
- Design program evaluation at the front-end of the process for developing a food hub and an urban farm to gauge the longer-term impacts of these projects on key community indicators.
- Indicators that can be considered include viability testing, health outcomes, local economic impacts, food access, food assistance, and changes in community asset portfolios.
- Conduct a follow-up network mapping analysis 1-2 years from now to gauge changes in network connectivity and diversity over time.

Internal Feedback Tools:

- Utilize the Agile Planning Canvas template as a tool to encourage dynamic and adaptable initiatives.
- Support mastery of the agile canvas template among key stakeholders who can then teach the template to others in the network.
- Create an open-source virtual space to enable the agile canvas for food hub and urban farm projects to keep people informed and involved.



LOCAL FOOD HUB

The following steps provide examples of activities that can lay the groundwork for the development of a Healthy Local Food Hub that can facilitate access to healthy foods and foster entrepreneurial and workforce development in the local food sector.

- 1) Simulate food hub activities through smaller events, such as a fundraiser for hunger organizations that features local food and local chefs.
- 2) Form a farmers' market network to better coordinate farmers markets and access vendors who might want to make use of a food hub.
- 3) Utilize the Community Food Network to involve key partners that represent all aspects of the food value chain: farmers, farmer associations, institutions, hunger relief services, food-related businesses, distributors, or facilities managers.
- 4) Create a position for a "county forager" to administer interest surveys and broker connections between farmers, market outlets, and food pantries.
- 5) Develop an assessment of current distribution networks between the Akron-Canton Food Bank and meal programs and food pantries in Stark County to determine if a local distribution hub would improve distribution efficiency and storage capacity.
- 6) Create an inventory of potential facilities that could be utilized for a food hub, including under-utilized commercial kitchen spaces or empty or under-utilized buildings.
- 7) Organize a field trip to tour and learn about the ACENet kitchen incubator and broader local food efforts in Athens, Ohio.
- 8) Prepare a pre-development proposal to the Ohio Department of Development to do a more thorough assessment of organizational structure, markets, project phasing, facility requirements, and budgeting.



URBAN FARM DEVELOPMENT

The following steps provide examples of activities that can improve utilization of vacant land in Canton, Massillon, Alliance, or other cities to improve the availability of healthy local foods while seeding skills for entrepreneurship or workforce development in food production.

- 1) Organize a county-wide urban agriculture network of community and home gardeners to encourage learning between communities and draw potential market garden training candidates.
- 2) Develop an urban market farming training curriculum modeled after the training in Cuyahoga County that combines horticultural skills with business planning and marketing. Identify existing educators, farmers, or gardeners that can teach modules of the curriculum.
- 3) Organize public events to raise interest and enthusiasm for the potential of urban agriculture to improve quality of life in Stark County's cities. Events can include film screenings, learning circles, skill-building workshops, or local food pot-lucks.
- 4) Organize Mutual Aid working groups that enable people to contribute to each other's garden projects and learn new skills or techniques in the process.
- 5) Create a micro-enterprise fund that can provide start-up capital to individuals that complete the market garden training and submit a promising business plan.
- 6) Create an urban land inventory with the Stark County Land Reutilization Corporation and Stark Parks to identify potential land for urban or near-urban agriculture and review the process by which individuals can access land.
- 7) Convene community partners and urban gardeners to brainstorm the structure and function of an urban farm incubator that can reduce barriers of land and capital for aspiring urban farmers.
- 8) Develop favorable land-use planning and zoning to preserve and protect urban farms as urban green-space and storm water mitigation and encourage farmland preservation through zoning or agricultural easements at the edge of municipal areas.