

## General Population and Low-Income Population Focus Groups

### *Summary*

The purpose of the group discussions was to assess how people get food in an effort to understand how our community can improve the accessibility and availability of food resources. In addition to providing assessment data, the discussions that evolved through these focus group gatherings resulted in increased community awareness of food security issues. The focus group gatherings also led to the development of partnerships and the identification of participants interested in joining our Steering Committee.

### Primary source of food

The general population's primary source of food is more varied than the primary sources of utilized by the low-income population. These include all of the local full service grocery stores in Waushara County, a number of larger grocery stores outside of Waushara County, salvage grocery stores, other sources including food pantries and senior meal sites. The primary source of food for the low-income population includes the local grocery stores and a number of larger grocery stores outside of Waushara County. However, the grocery stores outside of Waushara County are only those that have or are perceived to have greatly reduced prices for groceries. The low-income population includes convenience stores and dollar stores as primary sources to obtain food.

The general population and low-income population obtain food from the primary sources identified in the previous paragraph because of the grocery stores location. The location is convenient. It is close to home. For the general population, this makes it "easy to run into town for some milk." This is an importance to the low-income population because they save money on gas. For the general population in addition to the convenience of being close to home they chose their primary source of food because it is near other things, including their bank, doctor, senior meal site, or place of employment.

For some people convenience means more than location it also means one-stop shopping. One-stop shopping is another reason why people chose their primary grocery store. One-stop shopping means a person can get everything in one trip, including paper products, medicine, seeds, hardware, clothes, movies, and food, for example milk, frozen foods, and meat.

The choice or variety of food products available makes a difference. For the general population, this means that it is possible to obtain unique items that, as a participant explained, "you can't get at other grocery stores" and the store regularly stocks items of interest, including ethnic foods, so "they have what you want" as one focus group participant put it.

For both the general population and the low-income population, the offering of specific food items or departments influenced their choice of a primary source of food. Meat and cheese are the common food items or departments that influenced the choice of a primary source of food. The freshness, flavor, quality, variety, and price of meat products are important. The grocery stores ability to butcher local animals is another factor. The willingness and ability of the store to accommodate customers by cutting meat to order, including into small portions is important. In addition, for the general population, the leanness of the cuts of meat makes a difference. The

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selection of cheese is important to both the low-income and general populations. For the low-income population the ability to have cheese cut to various sizes and have a smaller cut of cheese is factor in choosing a primary grocer.

The low-income population choice of primary grocery store is influenced by the deli, a grocery store department that is often seen as having convenience foods, verses the general population that is influenced by fruits, vegetables, organic foods, and bakery that are consider to be the more nutritious parts of the grocery store. For the low-income population, the grocery store department other than meat and cheese that influences a choice of primary grocery store is the store deli and the variety of items available through the deli. As a participant explained, "Precooked items are practical for the kids when we are working and don't have time to cook." For the general population, the other food products or departments of importance were fruits and vegetables, organic foods, and bakery. For fruits and vegetables the important factors were freshness and quality, including the quality of canned fruits and vegetables. For organic food, the important factor was variety and access to organic milk. For bakery, the focus group response was that they "have good bakery available," may refer to quality and freshness.

For both the general population and the low-income population, the quality of the products available from the food source influences the decision to make that food source their primary food source. For the general population, it is important that a grocery store stand behind their products and at least replace a spoiled, damaged, or poor quality product. Another influence on the choice of food source is the prices at that store; are they lower than other stores or perceived to be lower; are they reasonable. For the low-income population, especially the elderly, a consistent lower price is also important, particularly if you buy food weekly or daily. Sales and specials influence where the general and low-income populations buy food. The general population has an awareness of the types of sales and specials that are available at their primary source of food, including coupons, double coupon days, senior discount days, punch cards or sales cards, and store drawings. People pay attention to the advertisements that are placed in the newspapers and choose stores with the best deals. Stores are also chosen because they stock what they advertise.

A friendly polite staff and management influence the choice of primary food source for both the low-income and general population. For the general population, the friendliness of customers is also important. The general population values customer service. Examples of customer service are setting aside the newspaper for a customer, taking call-in-orders and preparing the order for the customer to pick it up, informing a customer that they do not need to purchase a product today because a family member was already there earlier in the day, carrying groceries to the customers car, taking special orders for products that are not regularly stocked, and delivering groceries. In addition, the general population supports local grocery stores for services they provide to the community, like helping the local food pantry by storing the food pantries venison in the store freezer.

Both the general and low-income populations choose their primary grocery store because it is the local business and they support it. They realize that without regular customers, their local grocery store may close. They like that the local grocery store is locally owned and managed. The primary source of food is chosen by both the general and low-income populations because it

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is familiar. It is easy to get around the store and find the food products that are needed or desired. Some shop at their primary grocery store, just out of force of habit.

For the low-income population, an influence on choosing a primary source of food is the simplicity of the atmosphere and product line of the store. They are more comfortable in a store that does not have a grand décor, fancy packaging of products, or high end food products, like lobster. To paraphrase a participant, they prefer a simple store where they do not need to pay for the “fancy stuff.”

Time, options for payment, and availability of carts are influences for both the general and low-income populations. The low-income and general populations enjoy quick trips to obtain food. Long lines at the checkout influence the choice of primary grocery store. For the low-income population, the hours of operation influence the choice of primary grocery store. Access to the primary store for groceries is need late at night and after work hours. The option for different types of payment for groceries is an influence on the choice of primary grocery store. Types of payment include debit cards, credit cards, quest cards/food stamps, and gift certificates. The availability of electric carts for those with disabilities and as one low-income participant explained, “nice big shopping carts with seats with buckles to strap in my two small children so they can’t get out. I can get in, get what I need, and get out.”

### Other sources of food

Other source of food for the general population include dollar stores, big box or general merchandise stores, specialty stores, farm stands, gardens, hunting, fishing, road side gathering, food pantries, senior meal sites, and restaurants. Specialty stores include cheese, meat, and organic and ethnic foods, including Mexican. The low-income population obtains food from similar sources, dollar stores, specialty stores, farm stands, gardens, hunting, fishing, road side gathering of berries, mushrooms, nuts, and asparagus, food pantries, senior meal sites, and restaurants. They did not mention the big box or general merchandise stores, other than those that are full service grocery stores. The specialty stores are those that carry ethnic food, particularly Mexican. In addition to the sources common to the general population, the low-income population notes additional sources of food including friends and neighbors, their employer, and special events. Some of the low-income population barter, trade, and accept donations of garden products, and meat of hunting and fishing from neighbors and friends. Those who work at a food processing business can receive excess produce or purchase products at reduced prices. The special events include the Labor Day Parade in Hancock, where potatoes are given out, and assistance programs by local service clubs and churches that give baskets of food to people in need. Some of these sources may be available to the general population, but are not notice to the degree that people with a low-income notice them as one of their sources of food.

### Enhancing local grocery stores

The general population and low-income population were asked how to make local grocery stores more attractive option for obtaining food. One proposal is that local grocery stores become a one-stop-shop. This could be accomplished by coordinating with other businesses in the area on hours and advertising to increase the opportunity for someone to accomplish more than one task on their way to and from the grocery store. An alternative may be to expand the services offered

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at the grocery store. Another idea is to offer more variety of products and brands, specific types of products mentioned were personal care products, healthy food products, produce, and products available to participants in the Federal Women Infants, and Children (WIC) assistance program. There was a suggestion for new meat case and encouragement for the local grocery store to try offering new products. Improve the quality and variety of fresh produce available would make the local grocery store more attractive. Products that are available for diabetics could be identified and/or put in a special issue or area of the store.

Lower prices could make local grocery stores a more attractive option. The suggestion on a way to lower prices from the general and low-income populations was to advertise less and use the savings to lower prices on a regular basis. The low-income population had more suggestions. One suggestion was to use Aldi as a model and reduce prices by offering generic foods or requiring customers to bag their own groceries. Offer smaller portions that would cost less for a single trip to the store. Offer bulk or large package sizes that may cost less per quantity of product than smaller individual packages.

The low-income population would like to see local grocery stores have more sales or specials. Suggestions are weekly sales or weekend specials. Compete directly with other stores and try to match their sales. Local grocery stores could have pallet sales, which would be buying a product in bulk, like potatoes or non-perishables, and passing the saving on to customers. The local grocery store could accept coupons, including internet coupons. Clearly identify sales items and coupon sales items. Coordinate with in the same grocery store chain, so that sales at stores of that chain are the same as the sales at the local chain store.

The general population has a number of other suggestions that would make the local grocery an attractive option. These suggestions include being friendlier and customer service. An example is offering to carry groceries to the car. A faster checkout time would help make the local grocery store more attractive. It would be helpful if the local grocery store was open at convenient times, even 24-hours, seven day a week. The local grocery store could have electric carts available for the disabled. Not selling alcohol would make the local grocery store more attractive to some people.

### Enhancing farm stands

Both the low-income population and the general population shop at local farm stands because the produce is of better quality, it tastes better. As participants said, "Homegrown is better than shipped in – corn, tomatoes, yum." Another participant stated that "fruit in stores is grown for storage not taste." Farm stand produce is considered to be fresh. Some in the general population believe farm stand produce is grown with few pesticides and is more organic. Probably along the same line of thought, the low-income population feels the farm stand produce is safer, so that as a participant put it, "you do not need to be afraid that you are going to get salmonella poisoned or something like that."

Both the low-income and general populations shop at the farm stands to support the local community and local farmers. People go to the farm stands because they can not grow enough in their personal garden. The variety of produce available is good even though it is seasonal. The farmers are friendly. The price for produce at the farmer stand is often lower than other sources.

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As a participant said, “you can get more for your money.” For the general population, the farm stands are convenient; they are close by or on your driving route. You can also purchase lower quantities.

For some of the low-income and general population, farm stands would be more attractive if they offered more variety, including selling produce from other places when it is not in season here. Maybe include other products can be offered like flowers, honey, and spices. Some people would like to see craft items or clothing, others do not. Some people would like lower prices. A participant suggested offering a lower price for fruits or vegetables if the consumer pick or harvest the fruit or vegetable. Because it would be a pick/harvest-your-own operation, the cost would be less because fewer people would need to be hired to harvest the crop. The method of payment could be expanded beyond cash only. Other methods of payment include credit cards and Food Share. An additional need identified is to let more people know about the \$25 voucher for local farm stand produce that is available to seniors through the Waushara County Department of Aging.

The location and hours can be improved to make farm stands more attractive. Some farm stands need a more convenient location. A participant explained that they would prefer the farm stands be located where they can “leave the kids in the car, grab it and go; it can be very fast” Having better parking near food stands where, as a participant put it, “you don’t get run over,” would make farm stands more attractive. A suggestion was to locate a food stand close to a grocery. The hours of a farm stand can be improved. As a participant said, “I’d like to stop when I get out of work, but they are gone.” Farm stands could stay open later or be self-service.

Customer service and making consumers feel welcome would make farm stands more attractive. This could done by assisting customers in choosing produce or providing information on how to store and cook the produce that is purchased. The general population felt that making the farm stand more visibly attractive would bring people to shopping at the farm stands. Suggestions are to setup the produce display like in a supermarket, so it does not look like a cluttered mess. In addition, the produce could be better brushed free of sand and dirt.

### Overcoming obstacles to obtaining food

Obstacles to obtaining food that is needed or desired are financial, transportation, time, care of family members, health, weather, and type of food desired is not carried locally or is out of season. In addition, the low-income population noted obstacles surrounding food pantries. These included not knowing how to access the food pantry, customer service, not being able to satisfy all food and personal care product needs, and not knowing how to prepare food that is given.

Suggestions on how the community (government, businesses, organizations, churches, and individuals) can over come the financial obstacle of obtaining food are providing more employment opportunities, increasing incomes, increasing access to training and education for employment and household budgeting, fewer restrictions on rummage or garage sales, low price food, reducing the paperwork to apply for financial assistance, and providing a low-interest or no-interest credit card for the purchase of food. To address the obstacle of transportation, suggests are free or affordable with a payment plan driving classes and drivers license, public

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transportation, volunteers shop for people or provide rides, more grocery stores offer to fill orders for pickup or deliver, and require people to shovel their sidewalks. To address the obstacle of time, grocery stores could stay open longer and people will need to plan and shop ahead. To address the obstacle of caring of family members, suggestions are offering day care and helping your family and friends. Classes on winter driving could address one of the weather issues and requiring people to shovel their sidewalk. To address some health related issues, there could be senior days at the grocery store, where seniors receive a discount and stores could assist seniors in physical obtaining their groceries of the shelves, especially is scheduled at less busy times. Taking groceries to the car, home delivery and assembling groceries to pickup could also help those with health problems. Education could be provided at senior meal sites, libraries, and food pantries about diets and nutrition for children and adults. The senior meal sites are a source of prepared nutritious food and there is a meals-on-wheels program. There is also Cooperative Care, which provides for a fee personal and in-home support care for people with disabilities, including assistance with shopping, meal planning, and cooking. To provide access additional types of food, suggestions are informing the grocery stores about diabetic needs maybe with the help of the hospital, grocery stores could increasing the number of frozen fruits available when local fresh fruit is not available, survey residents to see what people want in the grocery store, grocers could offer to special order items, and as a participant put it, sell or “bring higher quality produce to smaller communities.”

To address issues of food pantry type programs, the suggestions are offering food buying clubs with low fees or lower costs, such as Ruby’s Pantry, Share, and Angel Food Ministries. Current services could be better advertised. Education could be provided at the food pantries and other locations on how to grow fruits and vegetables, how to prepare food and stretch the food dollar, how to store fresh and processed food, how to use food items, especially those given out by the food pantries. Community gardens could be created for people to use the produce they grow of donate it to the food pantries. Donations to the food pantries could be increased by advertising, gleaning farm fields, organize food drives, and collecting unused left over food from restaurants. The food pantries could assist people further by treating everyone with respect and equitably and by allowing people to use more than on food pantry, choose the food they receive, allow people to return more than once a month, offering bread, milk and personal care products, and offering coupons for those items not available at the pantry.