

MAPLEWOOD, MINNESOTA

community food assessment



INTRODUCTION

The food environment of any community can have a strong impact on a person's health and well-being.¹ Food insecurity, defined by the USDA as a household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food,² is a serious problem currently facing many people in the United States.³ According to USDA statistics, Minnesota had a household food insecurity prevalence of 9.5% in 2017,³ which means that 1 in 10 households in Minnesota struggle with food insecurity.

Food insecurity as a public health issue highlights the consequences of inadequate access to healthier foods, where consuming a nutrient-poor diet may contribute to the development of obesity, heart disease, hypertension, diabetes, and other chronic diseases.² If these issues are prevalent in a community, they help create challenges and barriers for healthy living.²

Availability and **accessibility** are major contributing factors to a person or family's ability to consistently have healthy and nutritious food.⁴ Availability refers to the physical location and existence of healthier food in certain areas of a community or in a store specifically, whereas accessibility refers to a broader picture of cost, quality, location or socioeconomic barriers that may exist in accessing healthier foods.⁴

This study will document results of a community food assessment in Maplewood, a city in Ramsey County, Minnesota. In Ramsey County, 13% of households experienced food insecurity in 2015,⁵ which is higher than the national average of 11.8% of households in the United States, as reported by the USDA in 2017.³ Ramsey County is the smallest county geographically in Minnesota but is one of the most diverse in the state.⁶ The current population of the city of Maplewood is 38,018, which makes it the second largest city in Ramsey County after Saint Paul.⁷ The city includes a racial and ethnic makeup of 67.4% white, 14.3% Asian, 8.6% Black or African American, 6.2% Hispanic or Latino (of any race), 3.1% other, and 0.3% American Indian and Alaska Native.⁷ Maplewood is home to a number of Hmong, Karen, Nepali, Somali, and Hispanic recent immigrant or refugee groups.

The need for a community food assessment was called out in the 2040 Comprehensive Plan for Maplewood. The **purpose of this assessment** is to identify barriers and gaps in healthy food access and community assets. The guiding question for the assessment is:

"To what extent is healthier food accessible, affordable and available for residents of Maplewood, Minnesota?"

Results from the assessment will be used to provide recommendations for the city to improve food security and food access for residents of Maplewood.



METHODS

Procedures

Information for this assessment was obtained from primary data collection and existing secondary data sources. Primary data collection includes informational interviews conducted with 16 key stakeholders working within the food system of Maplewood to determine strengths and weaknesses related to food access for members of the community. Key stakeholders were selected from a variety of places including food assistance programs, schools, community garden programs, a farmers' market, food shelves, community development programs, and charity organizations. Those interviewed were asked a series of questions regarding strengths and weaknesses of the environment, what works well in improving food access, barriers people face, and perceptions of affordability of healthier food.

The secondary data sources used were two sets of existing survey results containing relevant information for the assessment.

- The 2018 Community Health Assessment⁸ for Saint Paul-Ramsey County Public Health provided answers to open-ended questions based on ZIP code geographical areas. The information available for the three ZIP codes in Maplewood were used.
- Results from the 2017 Minnesota Food Shelf Client Survey⁹ for Ramsey County were used to gather information about residents who access a food shelf in the area.

Data analysis of key informant interviews was completed by the student investigator using qualitative analytic procedures of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification.¹⁰ Descriptive notes from interviews were recorded and summarized to identify key themes and similar concepts and data was merged for interpretation.



Maplewood,
Minnesota

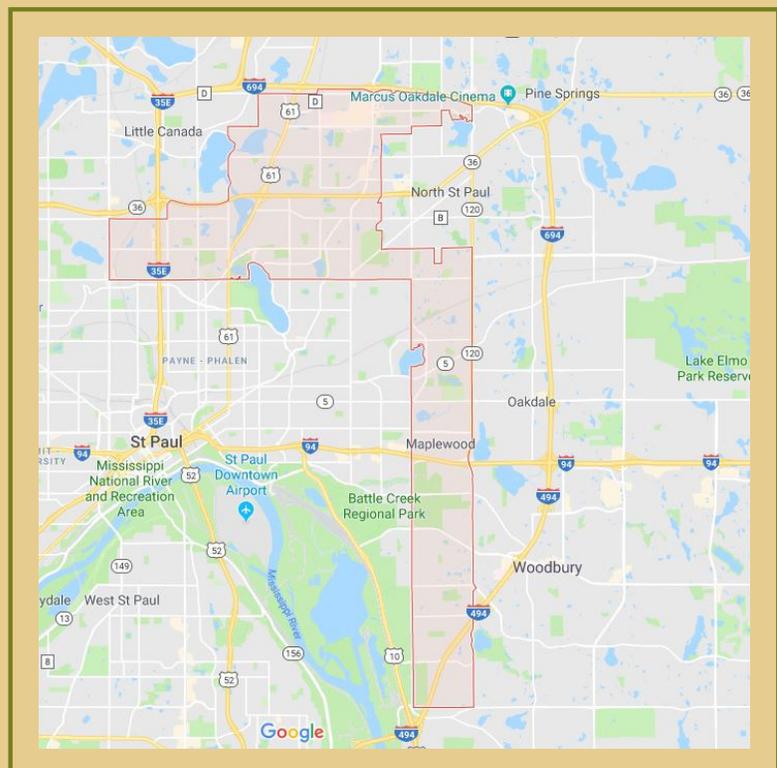


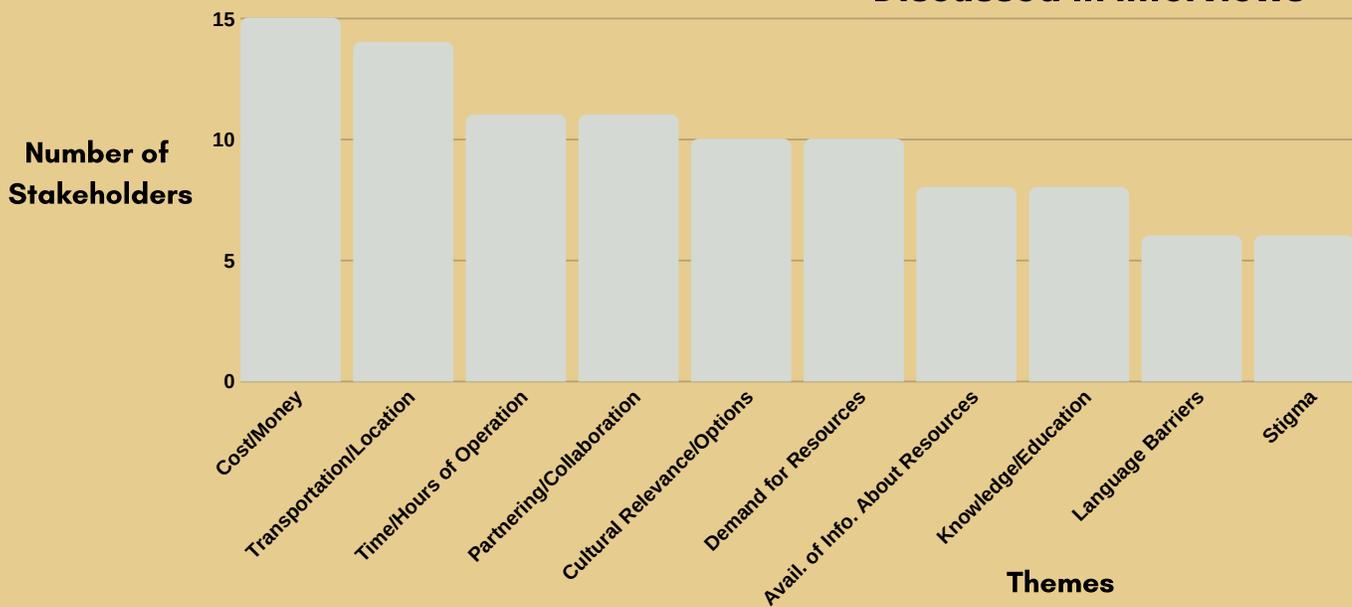
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RESULTS

Informational Interviews

Ten major themes emerged from the interviews:

Frequency of Themes Discussed in Interviews



1 Cost/Money

Most of those interviewed (94%) described cost and money as barriers for people in accessing healthier food. While all described this issue as not being unique to Maplewood, there is area for improvement in supporting programs that aim to address cost as a barrier. Adequate funds for staffing, outreach, resources or projects are needed in order to implement programs to make healthier food more affordable. Existing assets in this area include programs that give more purchasing power to individuals and allow them to stretch their dollars for healthier foods.

"Programs like Market Bucks (a program that matches SNAP-EBT spending at farmer's markets) are giving families more access for healthy foods and the money is going to nearby farmers, building the wealth of our community by keeping the money local." (non-profit organization)

2 Transportation/Location

Transportation and location emerged as markers of weaknesses and strengths in the current food environment in Maplewood. In terms of weaknesses, most of those interviewed (88%) identified transportation as a major barrier people face in accessing healthier food in this community. Seven people identified a need for delivery services or mobile distribution and access for food assistance programs or general grocery shopping. In terms of strengths, there are three large community garden locations as well as a number of smaller ones throughout the city. This contributes to the accessibility of healthier, locally grown produce; however, those who do not live close to a garden do not have easy access.

"A big barrier to healthy food access is the shortage of reliable and affordable transit and transportation options, especially for those with limited or no access to a car." (elected county official)

RESULTS

3 Time/Hours of Operation

Time and hours of operation were major themes in many interviews (69%). Time is a barrier seen on both sides of food access issues, restricting organizations' ability to offer more programming, and also creating a challenge for people who have difficulty with carving out time to find and utilize resources. Community organizations cannot increase their hours of operation due to funding shortages, decreasing available hours for people in the community to access these programs.

"Resources that are available are often limited as to how much you can go each month and might have long wait times." (non-profit organization)

4 Partnering/Collaboration

Many of those interviewed (69%) discussed partnering and collaboration as a need for increasing food access in the community. Greater communication between existing programs and organizations would help serve a higher demand and bring together the community as a whole. A current strength in this area is an existing effort to connect food shelves and bridge gaps in food access for different parts of the east metro.

"There is great opportunity in working with food shelves in a wide variety of locations, comparing regions to find what best practices are in some areas and how they can be incorporated in others." (non-profit organization)

5 Cultural Relevance/Options

Many stakeholders (63%) identified a need for more culturally relevant food items available for all members of the community. Key stakeholders identified an area of improvement and need for more acceptance in honoring diversity and demographics around the area and striking a balance of providing culturally relevant and healthier foods. Older adults are another population identified as facing a barrier of lack of food options to adequately meet their needs. Existing assets in this area include usage of community gardens, farmers' market variety, client-choice models at food shelves, and a couple of small ethnic grocery stores within the city.

"Having choice and the variety of choice that is culturally relevant or appropriate increases food access for members of the community." (non-profit organization)

6 Demand for Resources

A high demand for resources emerged as a major theme in many interviews (63%). A weakness of the community is that food-related resources are limited relative to demand for those resources. One example that was raised was the food shelves in the community, which are described as meeting the needs of as many people as they can but are currently not able to meet the demand or do much community outreach or expansion of services. Strengths in the community include the rapid growth of additional food programs adding to options for people in need.

"The important thing when it comes to food access is that it's a patchwork and you need a lot of different options." (non-profit organization)

RESULTS

7 Availability of Information About Resources

Fifty percent of the stakeholders identified a greater need for information about all available resources in the area. These stakeholders reported their perception that many people are unaware of what is available or how to access it. Area for improvement exists in making concise information readily available for those who need access. Word of mouth was described as a current strength in the area and a main source of communication on what is available.

“A lot of people are unaware that hunger is an issue. Unless you are directly experiencing it you don’t know of any resources.” (non-profit organization)

8 Knowledge/Education

Fifty percent of the stakeholders identified knowledge and education as factors that affect a person’s ability to access healthier foods. Weakness in this area exists when people receive foods they don’t know how to use or prepare; in addition, people may not have a background knowledge of what a healthy meal might look like or how to prepare it. A strength of the community that might help bridge this gap is the presence of education programs that focus on making healthy choices in preparing healthy foods with the options people have.

“It’s helpful to send home a bag of groceries but if people don’t know how to use those foods it is not effective and adds a barrier.” (community program)

9 Language Barriers

Language barriers were identified in 38% of the interviews as contribution to food insecurity. Areas for improvement include having people on staff who speak multiple languages or creating adaptable and accommodating resource spaces. This includes having a variety of information available in different languages that reflects the needs of the different population groups within Maplewood. Existing strengths in this area include a number of community programs and non-profits who staff multi-lingual employees or translate materials used with clients.

“Having staff that are reflective of the people you are serving in terms of cultural diversity and language is very helpful.” (non-profit organization)

10 Stigma

Stigma was described as a major barrier for people in accessing healthier foods in 38% of the interviews. There is area for improvement as stigma exists in society surrounding utilization and need for help and resources that often causes people to feel uncomfortable reaching out or accepting aid. Strength exists in the presence of programs in the community that strive to treat people well and with dignity and create a positive and welcoming experience without judgement.

“Many families may feel like they don’t want assistance because of stigma when they could really use it.” (state-agency)

RESULTS

Survey Data

As a part of the 2018 Community Health Assessment for Saint Paul-Ramsey County Public Health,⁸ answers to a number of community health related, open-ended questions were compiled and organized by ZIP code. There were 246 respondents in ZIP code area 55119, 86 respondents in ZIP code area 55109, and 247 respondents in ZIP code area 55117. The resulting answers that are relevant to the community food environment are described below.

What helps your community stay healthy?

55119 - 23% respondents said good or nutritious food, clean water or exercise

55109 - 16% of respondents said access to healthy foods or free healthy foods

55117 - 21% of respondents said access to grocery stores or eating healthy foods

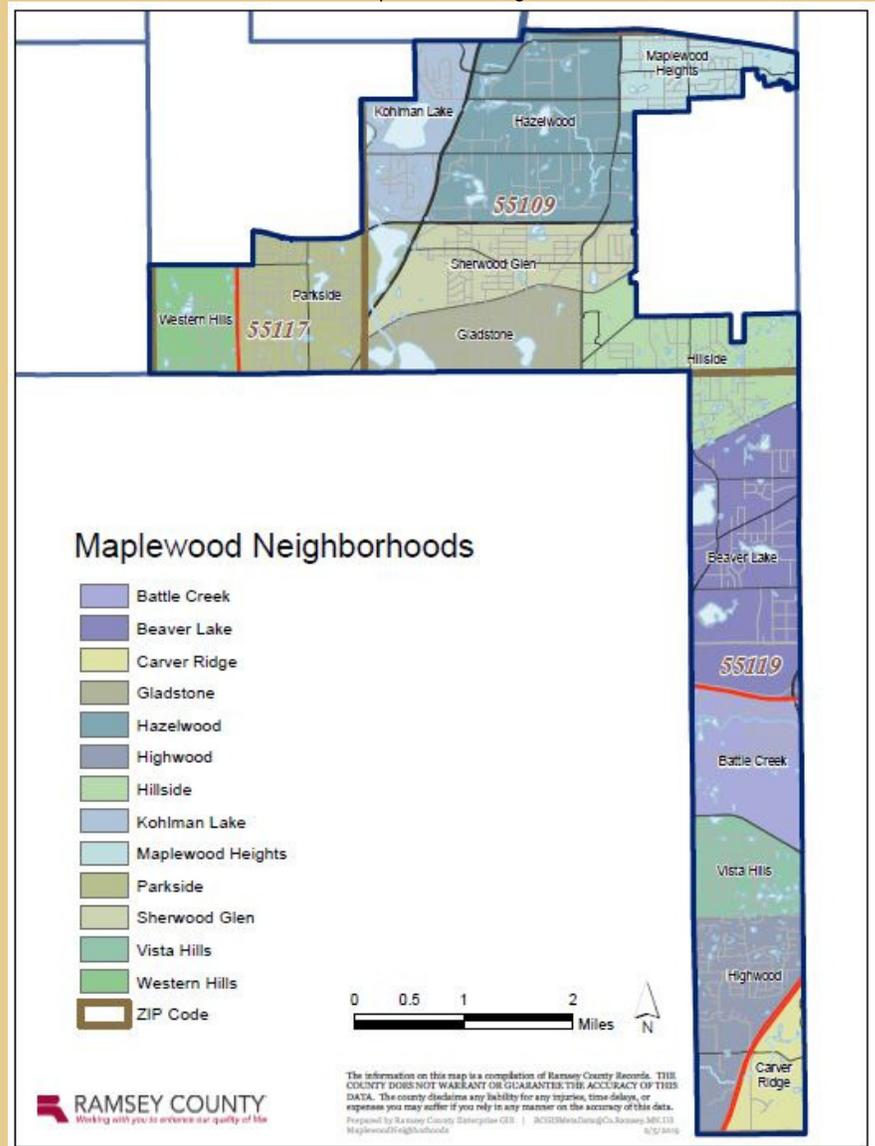
What keeps your community from being healthy?

55119 - 22% of respondents said unhealthy eating or fast food chains

55109 - 44% of respondents said economy, lack or inadequate communication, or poor and incorrect information about community services

55117 - 19% of respondents said consumption of unhealthy food due to unaffordability

Maplewood Neighborhoods and ZIP code Areas



The 2017 Minnesota Food Shelf Client Survey⁹ for Ramsey County included information about those who access food shelves in the area, which included 8 participating food shelves and 197 returned surveys. In terms of transportation, 68% of respondents said they travel 1 mile or more to reach a food shelf. As a measure of total food access, 57% of clients said they got half or more of their total food from a food shelf in the last 6 months, and 51% of clients said they got half or more of their total fruits and vegetables from a food shelf in the last 6 months. Four percent of respondents said they would like to provide more fruits and vegetables for their family.

DISCUSSION

Responses from surveys and key informant interviews describe the current food environment of Maplewood as having strengths, areas for improvement, and opportunities for change. The following recommendations are based on a combination of findings from the interviews and community responses in the community health assessment and food shelf client survey. Recommendations were also developed in referencing the Minnesota Food Charter.¹¹ The recommendations are similar to the action steps outlined in the 2040 Comprehensive Plan.

Recommendations

Accessibility

1. Ensure food stores, hunger relief programs, farmers' markets, community gardens, and other food sources are located in places easily reached by bus, bike, or foot.¹¹
 - a. Install and maintain sidewalks, metered crosswalks, and bike paths on routes that provide access to these locations. Require sidewalk and bike path standards for all new developments in the city.
 - b. Support the installation of bus stops and bus routes near these community food sources and coordinate bus schedules with the sources' open hours to increase transportation accessibility throughout the city.¹¹
2. Establish affordable food-delivery services that increase mobile food distribution.¹¹
 - a. Support programs such as a 'mobile market' that bring food from local stores and farmers' markets to seniors, individuals with mobility issues, and people without transportation. Deliver healthy food grown at nearby farms to neighborhood drop-off sites.
3. Support development of a central location for food assistance programs and other community needs.
 - a. Identify a location for a variety of community needs to be accessed in one space. Support development of a community center that provides resources to people in the area and a safe, welcoming space that decreases stigma and increases accessibility of options.

Affordability

4. Support policies and programs that increase purchasing power for healthier foods.
 - a. Incentive programs such as 'market bucks' (a program that matches SNAP-EBT spending at farmers' markets) and 'veggie prescriptions' (a program involving healthcare-provider prescriptions that can be exchanged for fresh fruits and vegetables) encourage healthy food purchases and allow people to stretch their dollar.¹¹ Supporting the use and development of programs such as this at local food stores and farmers' markets will increase affordability of healthier foods.
 - b. Partner with local clinics and farmers' markets to establish these programs.

Availability

5. Support existing food assistance programs and development of additional programs to help meet demand in the area.
 - a. Support development or expansion of food shelves and hunger relief programs to available areas within the city.

DISCUSSION

6. Provide a wider variety of food sources in communities with few options for healthy food.¹¹
 - a. Support the establishment and maintenance of community gardens in new areas of the community or establishment of urban farms in appropriate areas.¹¹
 - b. Encourage edible and pollinator-friendly landscapes on all properties.
 - c. Support a city policy surrounding the requirement of a fresh food source within ½ mile of every residence or in each of the 13 neighborhoods in Maplewood. Support developments that decrease the distance between households and healthy retail food options. In order to determine future land use policies and gaps in food access reference the food access map in the 2040 Comprehensive Plan.
 - d. Integrate community gardens into public housing developments, areas that are easily accessible by many and create incentives for community gardens in affordable housing developments that receive public assistance.¹¹
7. Increase availability of information about resources available for members of the community.
 - a. Create an area of the Maplewood website that is updated regularly with information on all resources available for low-income residents.
 - b. Create a document in various formats and language options that is updated twice per year with information on all resources available for low-income residents and distribute to programs for use in recommending options for clients. Distribute document to frequently accessed buildings or areas in the city for people to see.

CONCLUSION

Availability, affordability, and accessibility are essential aspects of food security in a community.⁴ Implementing the recommendations developed from this community food assessment will help to increase food security in the city of Maplewood. The food environment plays an important role in the health of society and supporting changes that help create a healthier food environment will be beneficial for all.

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