# TOWARD THE RIGHT TO FOOD IN MERCER COUNTY

A NOURISHING NETWORKS REPORT MAY 2025



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# **Sponsors**

















### INTRODUCTION



On May 15th, 2025 Mercer County, WV Nourishing Networks Workshop brought together people from different backgrounds, expertise, and experiences to explore the state of food access in Mercer county. The group shared in laughter, learning, and listening to deepen our understanding of what limits access to food and quality nutrition, and what can be done about it.

The workshop advanced two stages:

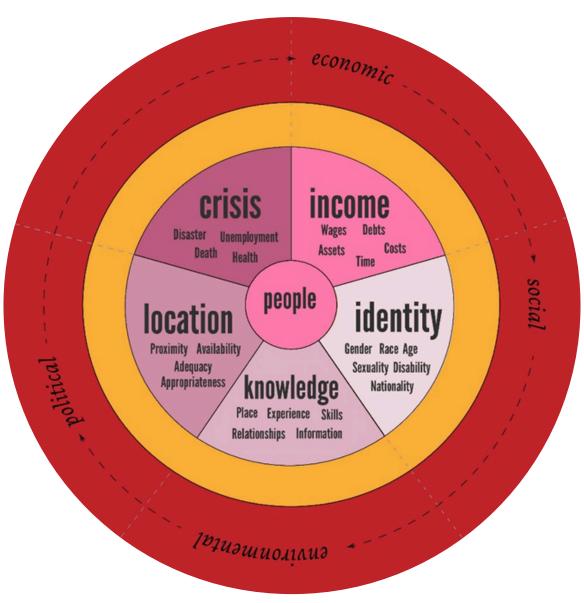
- Five teams were assembled with a mix of food pantry staff; school staff; local agency and state employees; and healthcare workers to conduct an assessment of the barriers to accessing food.
- The teams worked to identify community assets and food resources which could be mobilized to improve food access.

Over the course of 6 hours, our 29 participants and 4 facilitators collectively identified 60+ barriers to food access, 48 assets that improve food security in the area, and discussed strategies to build on these findings. In this brief reflection of the workshop, we present the results of these discussions.

The intention of the document is to provide a record of the meeting and provide a framework for the next phase of consultation among those who wish to continue working together to advance the Right to Food in Mercer county. Our hope is that it will offer a resource for continued organizing and policy change to improve food access at the local, county, and state level.

# **FOOD ACCESS BARRIERS**

The center of our concern about healthy food access is **people**. Across West Virginia, many people confront significant barriers to accessing affordable, adequate, nutritious foods. Some of the forces that affect people's ability to access healthy food are represented in our food access barriers wheel below. The inner circle is composed of a series of social constraints that have the most direct impact on the ability of an individual, a household, or a community to access food.



# FOOD ACCESS BARRIERS EXPLAINED

**Crisis:** refers to disasters, unemployment, health issue or death that can undermine food access for an individual, household or community.

Income: refers to the effect of someone's resources in wages or assets as well as the costs of food, debts carried, and the time limits placed on those who work rather than growing food for themselves.



Identity: refers to the way someone's gender, race, disability, sexuality, nationality or age affects their ability to access food.

**Location**: refers to people's proximity to healthy food outlets, the availability of particular foods, as well as the ability to grow food.

**Knowledge:** refers to what people know, what experience or skills they have, their placebased understanding, and the relationships they have with others.

# COMMUNITY IDENTIFIED BARRIERS

The participants of the workshop identified many barriers to food access in their community:

# Crisis

#### **Identified Crisis Barriers**

- Flooding: FEMA flood disaster county
- Drug epidemic / substance abuse
- Mental health
- Americorps cuts
- · Political Crisis
- Coping skills
- · Lack of support
- Natural disasters/landscape can affect access
- Price difference for cleaner eating

#### **Identified Income Barriers**

- Fixed income
- Low wages
- Lack of employment opportunities
- Price increases
- · Health issues prevent work readiness
- Drug dependencies
- WIC, SNAP
- Tax credits
- Credit scores
- Land/Rent
- Income requirements are too high
- Lack of training opportunities
- Transportation
- Job requirements / ID requirement
- Mental health
- Criminal background
- Lack of funding
- Finding appropriate child/healthcare
- Income requirements for food banks, SNAP, WIC
- Having to pay for benefits/lack of benefits
- Benefit Cliff





# COMMUNITY IDENTIFIED BARRIERS



#### **Identified Location Barriers**

- Rural + Mountains
- Limited access
- · Lack of transportation
- Lack of infrastructure
- · Lack of markets
- · Lack of assistance acceptance
- Uneven distribution of resources

#### **Identified Knowledge Barriers**

- Need a degree for jobs
- DHHR services not fully known
- Need connections to find resources
- WIC and VA advertise resources
- Nutrition education (home economics, food labels, gardening)
- Education on food insecurity
- Need to break down judgements and tell real stories
- Outreach through word of mouth, social media, pamphlets, school curriculum
- Legislators not aware/listening
- Knowing what programs are available and how to apply
- Lack of internet access
- Lack of promotion for charities

#### **Identified Identity Barriers**

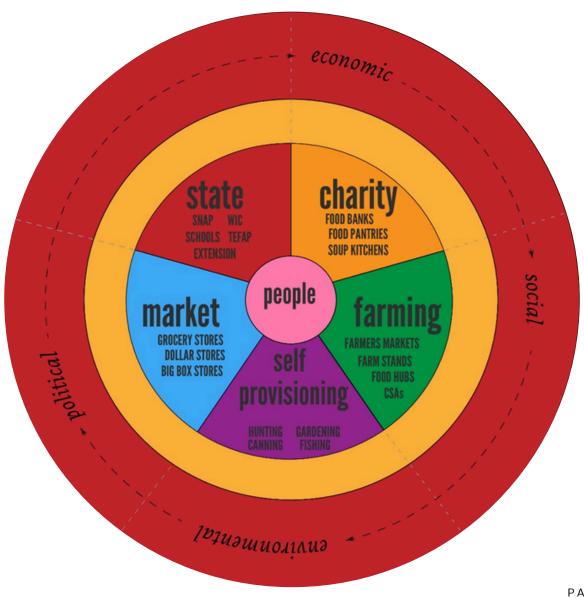
- · Lack of community board
- Criminal Records
- Credit Checks
- Single parents
- Unhoused / low income
- Embarrassed / do not want to be judged or felt sorry for
- Too prideful to ask for help
- Religion (Soup kitchens require you to attend sermon)
- Political party
- LGBTQ+
- Lack of education opportunities
- Disabled
- Do not want to talk to outsiders
- Mental health

Knowledge



# **FOOD ACCESS ASSETS**

People access healthy food through various mechanisms. Some access healthy food by spending their wages in a grocery store or through the farming sector (local farmers market) many other individuals, households and communities cannot afford to access food only in this way. Some of the strategies and initiatives to improve people's access to healthy food are represented in the food access strategy wheel below. As this wheel demonstrates, the retail marketplace is not the only way in which people access food.



### FOOD ACCESS ASSETS EXPLAINED

**State:** refers to government programs such as SNAP, WIC and School programs that provide direct subsidies to offset the cost of food for individuals and households (especially children) who lack the money to access food in the market.



**Charity:** refers to free food rations provided by food banks, food pantries, and soup kitchens that is funded by donation.

**Farming:** refers to grower-based initiatives to sell produce through farmers markets and other mechanisms.

**Self-Provisioning:** refers to practices of hunting, foraging, fishing or growing your own food.

**Market:** refers to grocery stores, convenience stores, restaurants, dollar stores and the like where people exchanges wages for food.

# **COMMUNITY IDENTIFIED ASSETS**

The participants of the workshop identified many assets to food access in their community:



#### **Identified Market Assets**

- Dollar General, Walmart, Kroger
- WVFFC
- Local Butchers
- SNAP Stretch + WIC Farmer's Market
- Jim's Produce
- SBA + County Commission
- Chamber of Commerce
- Swanson's
- Sam's Club (membership fee)
- Traveling to Blacksburg for culturally appropriate foods

#### **Identified State Assets**

- Crisis hotlines
- Advocacy centers
- SNAP
- WIC
- K-12 Schools
- TEFAP
- Grants (federal/state)
- WVU Extension Family Program
- Senior Boxes/Meals
- Summer Feeding



#### **Identified Charity Assets**

- Catholic Charities
- American Red Cross
- Helpful Harvest
- Amy's House of Hope (must attend a sermon)
- Sacred Heart
- Union Mission
- Blessing Boxes
- Tender Mercies
- Could organize together
- Need more promotion

PAGE 8 Relying on volunteers and individuals having transportation



### **COMMUNITY IDENTIFIED ASSETS**

#### **Identified Farm Assets**

- Few individual farms
- Murphy Farms
- Mark Hawkey Farms (Blue Field and Pipestem)
- Tailgate Market
- WV Food & Farm Coalition
- Community Supported Agriculture
- Greenhouses @ Food pantry
- WV Department of Agriculture
- · Farmland protection board





#### **Identified Self-Provisioning Assets**

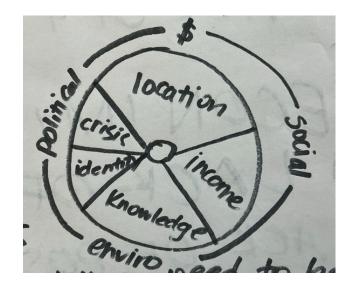
- Education on canning, seed saving, gardening
- Hunters for the Hungry
- Grow an Extra Row
- Supply program group for trading
- Grow This! WV
- WVU Extension
  - Canning





# **BUILDING CONSENSUS**

After identifying so many barriers and assets, it can be overwhelming to begin taking action. It is important that we practice the process of consensus building to begin distilling these in a manner that can address these barriers through policy or programmatic interventions that leverage the resources available. Groups came together to identify their top ten barriers to food access.



# TOP TEN BARRIERS TO FOOD ACCESS IN MERCER COUNTY



#### **Overall:**

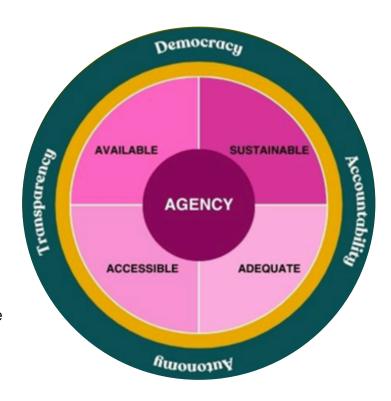
- 1. Transportation
- 2. Income
- 3. Mental Health + substance abuse
- 4. Education
- 5. Program funding
- 6. Program requirements (cliff effect)
- 7. Stigma
- 8. Communication on resources available
- 9. Location of food resources
- 10. Healthy food options

### THE RIGHT TO FOOD

The International Covenant Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (1966) states that the right to adequate food is realized when every man, woman, and child, alone or in community with others, has physical and economic access at all times to adequate food or means for its procurement."

Throughout the conversation among and within the groups present at the meeting, questions arose as to why some of the barriers and issues around food access persisted:

- Why is there so much reliance on corporatized food systems?
- What has caused this persistent pattern wherein the need for emergency food is increasing, and yet inflation has kept pantries from being able to fill their shelves?
- What can be done to help folks whose income is too high to receive state/federal aid (SNAP), but not high enough to afford their basic nutritional needs?



It is helpful to use the Right to Food framework to begin contextualizing and understanding these barriers and the resources and policies available (or lack thereofre) to address them. The legal framework for the Right to Food as defined by ICESCR defines the right to food to be met by individuals and their families, when food is **available**, **accessible**, **adequate**, **and sustainable**. While time restraints limited the group in being able to explore these concepts fully, planning is underway to provide the third section of the curriculum to both participants of the Nourishing Networks and anyone else who feels the desire to join this conversation. The questions below are helpful in examining where advocacy efforts or programmatic interventions should lie.

### THE RIGHT TO FOOD EXPLAINED

Agency is a central concept because those who access food, particularly those who struggle to access food, must have the freedom and autonomy to shape the conversations, political processes and food environments that comes to structure that access.

AVAILABLE SUSTAINABLE ACCESSIBLE ADEQUATE

Sustainability includes ensuring the long-term well-being of our health, our environment, our communities and creating systems that are valuable for future generations to have available,

accessible and adequate nutritious foods.

Rucouomy

Adequacy ensures that food is safe for consumption, culturally responsive and nutritious at all developmental stages of life. The food available does not put anyone else at risk of harm, nor does it require forfeiting cultural or religious standards of living.

Accessibility ensures that people do not go hungry at the expense of other basic needs, and that one will not have to choose between eating and other essentials such as housing, healthcare and transportation.

Availability means wellfunctioning food systems including access to the means of producing, processing, transporting and distributing food, or the means to purchase food.

### RIGHT TO FOOD ASSESSMENT

#### **Agency Assessment**

- How many people vote in municipal, county, state, national elections?
- Is there an opportunity for individuals or groups to have a meaningful voice about local, regional or national food system and nutrition support development? If so, how?
- How might you go about improving agency for the Right to Food in your organization or your community?

The averages from the participants' ratings have been highlighted.

#### **Adequacy Assessment**

Rate the following statements on a scale from 1-10 with 1 being low and 10 being high:

Food is safe for consumption, culturally responsive, and nutritious at all developmental stages of life: "You have enough of the foods you want and need to eat to support a healthy lifestyle."

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

The food that is available for consumption does not put anyone at risk of physical harm (from food sensitivity or allergies) and does not require forfeiting cultural or religious standards of living.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Think back to your conversations with those in your group. Has your Adequacy Assessment changed since attending the Nourishing Networks? If so how? What changed your mind?

# RIGHT TO FOOD ASSESSMENT CONTINUED

#### **Accessibility Assessment**

Rate the following statements on a scale from 1-10 with 1 being low and 10 being high:

People do not go hungry at the expensive of other needs.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

People don't have to choose between eating and other basic needs like paying rent, medications etc. People can access food even if they don't have a car.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Physical accessibility: Food is accessible to people vulnerable to physical challenges (elders, infants, differently abled, terminally ill, mentally ill, victims of natural disasters, etc.)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Economic accessibility: The cost of food does not compromise other standards of living. Community Based and State level social contract supports negate the tradeoff.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Think back to your conversations with those in your group. Has your Accessibility Assessment changed since attending the Nourishing Networks? If so how? What changed your mind?

# RIGHT TO FOOD ASSESSMENT CONTINUED

#### **Availability Assessment**

Rate the following statements on a scale from 1-10 with 1 being low and 10 being high:

When directly sourced from land and natural resources or by a well-functioning system of market and distribution: "The food you want to eat is produced sustainably and is stocked consistently."

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Access to productive resources, such as natural resources or growers and basic agricultural resources for food growth. At minimum food is available for purchase.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

At the most basic level, food can be transported from point A. to point B.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Think back to your conversations with those in your group. Has your Availability Assessment changed since attending the Nourishing Networks? If so how? What changed your mind?

# RIGHT TO FOOD ASSESSMENT CONTINUED

#### **Sustainability Assessment**

Rate the following statements on a scale from 1-10 with 1 being low and 10 being high:

Our food system is sustainable for the environment with minimal negative impact to the environment.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Our food system is sustainable for our health. Food is nutritious for current people and future generations.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Our food system is sustainable for our communities. Local production and distribution infrastructures are supported and encouraged.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Our food system is sustainable for future generations. Nutritious food will be available, accessible and affordable beyond my own lifetime.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Think back to your conversations with those in your group. Has your Sustainability Assessment changed since attending the Nourishing Networks? If so how? What changed your mind?



### MOVING FORWARD: FOOD POLICY COUNCIL OF MERCER COUNTY

In the weeks and months following the May 16th gathering of representatives at Nourishing Networks, we hope that these connections and conversations sparked a need for continued efforts in addressing the concerns highlighted during the six hour time frame. In recognizing that systemic change doesn't happen in a day, we invite participants to consider forming what is loosely defined as a "food policy council". This working group can be made up of elected officials, people with lived experience of hunger/poverty, social service workers, healthcare employees, senior services employees, school staff, and really anyone with a vested interest in the food security of Mercer county. Some examples of people to consider involving in the Food Policy Council are listed in the next few pages. Some elected to take a leading role in the development of a group to discuss these subjects.

# MOVING FORWARD: MERCER COUNTY CONTACT INFORMATION

#### **DHHR Office**

(304) 425-8738

#### **WIC Office**

(304) 325-3922

#### **Family Resource Network**

Greg Puckett Director drugfree@strongcommunities.org (304) 913-4956

#### **WVU Extension**

(304) 425-3097

Brenda Pruett Extension Agent – 4-H Youth Development	brenda.pruett@mail.wvu.edu
Jill Puckett Nutrition Outreach Instructor	jill.puckett@mail.wvu.edu
Jodi Richmond Extension Agent – Agriculture & Natural Resources	jodi.richmond@mail.wvu.edu
Jo Anne Stafford Program Assistant	joanne.stafford@mail.wvu.edu

#### **Locally Owned Grocers**

Locally Owned G	II UCEI S
Grants Supermarket-E Main Street, Princeton	(304) 425-5700
Grants Supermarket- Athens Road, Princeton	(304) 425-5887
Grants Supermarket-New Hope Road, Princeton	(304) 425-6081
Grants Supermarket- Bluefield Avenue, Bluefield	(304) 325-8945
Grants Supermarket-Maple Acres Road, Bluefield	(304) 325-6224
Grants Supermarket- Bluewell	(304) 589-5876
Lashmeet Grocery	Unavailable
C & J Enterprises	(304) 425-2867
Cooks Packing	(304) 589-7203
Gary's Market LLC	(304) 589-4279
Glenwood Country Store	(304) 487-2009

Nemours Grocery Inc

#### **Mercer County Schools Child Nutrition**

Krista Kessinger kmkessinger@k12.wv.us Director (304) 487-1551 ext. 1255

#### **Mountaineer Food Bank**

Chad Morrison info@mountaineerfoodbank.org Chief Executive Officer (304) 364-5518

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Food Charities		
Athens Church of God	(304) 384-7959	
Carr Memorial United Methodist Church	(304) 425-3049	
Family Ministry Center Food Pantry	Unavailable	
First Assembly of God	(304) 425-5715	
God's Store House	(304) 301-2140	
Hiawatha Baptist Church Food Pantry	(304) 920-3691	
Operation Compassion of Mercer County	(304) 425-6505	
Sacred Heart Food Pantry	(304) 320-3625	
Shepherd's Hands	(864) 980-4568	
South Central Educational Development, Inc	(304) 325-6105	
Tender Mercies Ministries	(304) 425-2557	
The Salvation Army of Mercer County-Bluefield	(304) 327-7411	
The Salvation Army of Mercer County-Princeton	(304) 425-2971	
The Wade Center	(304) 323-3777	
Farmers Markets		
Mercer County Tailgate Market	(304) 425-3079	

Market

(304) 248-8388

### CONCLUSION

Today, networking efforts are being made to encourage continued meeting and conversations on food access and realizing the Right to Food in Mercer.

It is our hope that Nourishing Networks events such as the one in Mercer county will foster the formation of local food policy councils that can continue to advance advocacy and programmatic interventions that can meet the food access needs of all the people in the area. Food system change doesn't happen with just one individual or one idea. All of the participants and the communities in southern West Virginia are integral to forming food systems that value nutrition, regional food economies, and self-sufficiency and food sovereignty.

#### **Potential Mercer County Food Policy Council:**

Richard Brett
Stephanie Hill
Katherine Dillow
Lisa Davis
Diane Landy
Callie Lamb
Brandon Austin
Craig Hammond with Union Mission
Murphy Farm Representatives (Lashmeet)

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# For further details about Nourishing Networks in Mercer county, and organizing toward the Right to Food, please contact:

**Mercer County Coalition for Healthy Communities** 



Coalition@strongcommunities.org