



## **IMPROVING ACCESS TO HEALTHY FOOD IN METRO RICHMOND**

**by**

### **The Food Access Immersion Team 2018**

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### **Introduction**

As part of our Leadership Metro Richmond experience, our immersion team studied healthy food access issues in the Richmond Metropolitan Area. Over the course of several months, we interviewed numerous people in the community with diverse viewpoints on how to address Richmond's healthy food access problems (see complete list of interviewees below). By writing this paper, we hope to educate you on the complexity of this social problem and provide insight into what we learned through our interviews.

Healthy food access and food deserts can be defined in many ways, but generally the terms refer to lack of access to affordable, healthy food (in many cases because of the distance to the nearest grocery store).<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the concept of food security is defined by the United Nations' Committee on World Food Security as: at all times, having physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet a person's dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.<sup>2</sup> So, how big is this problem? In the City of Richmond in 2013, 20.3% of the population had low access to food (compared to 17.8% on a state-wide level) and 22.8% were food insecure (compared to 12.7% on a state-wide basis)<sup>3</sup>.

However, as we have learned, access to affordable healthy food is just one piece of a complex and nuanced problem of arming people with the skills to live healthy lives. As Karen Wells from the American Heart Association and Community Liaison noted, healthy eating is often not a priority given all the other stresses that low income households are facing. However, it is interconnected with all the other social determinants impacting health. Thus, one thing that became abundantly clear to our

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-access-research-atlas/documentation/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.fao.org/docrep/003/w3613e/w3613e00.HTM>

<sup>3</sup> Food Deserts in Virginia, Recommendations From the Food Desert Task Force, January 2014.

group is that while providing access to affordable healthy food is important, access alone is not the silver bullet. That said, in Richmond's East End there has been a lot of momentum behind building a new grocery store to help increase access to affordable healthy food. We spent a lot of time talking to people in the community about the East End grocery store project (newly named The Market @25<sup>th</sup>), and our paper will focus on that project as one aspect of the solution. To be clear, though, we understand that a grocery store alone is not the end and much more needs to be done to truly move the needle to increase healthy food access in our community.

## **Current Situation**

We learned that there are many organizations and individuals in the Richmond Metropolitan area who are doing excellent work in the community around this issue. Here are a few examples –

- Tricycle Gardens - Isabel Eljaiek told us about Tricycle Gardens' healthy corner store initiative in which Tricycle Gardens has a relationship with 25 local corner stores in USDA recognized food deserts (in each of the North Side, the South Side and the East End).
- Shalom Farms – We learned from Dominic Barrett about the organization's Prescription Produce Plan, which is a 10-12 week program that helps support families by providing fresh produce, health checks and nutrition education. About 10-15 households participate in each program at each site. During the program, the participants are provided a "prescription" of vegetables for the week, weekly health checks and an opportunity to build skills for healthy living.
- Bon Secours – Our group toured The Sarah Garland Jones Center (SGJC), where we spoke with Albert Walker, Director of Healthy Communities at SGJC. SGJC is located in the East End of Richmond and offers many programs focused on health and well-being. The programs include cooking classes, nutrition information, and wellness therapy sessions. The Front Porch Café is located within the center, which provides a pleasant environment for the community to gather and dine.
- SGJC's Parsley Kitchen not only provides cooking classes, but also lends its space as an incubator for small businesses that can't afford to rent their own space. Dieticians run the wellness programs for both adults and children. Families are placed in an 8-week "Real Food, Real Simple" program, which provides these families with resources and educating them on a healthy life-style.

We also had many conversations about the East End grocery store project. Based on our conversations, we believe there are a lot of people dedicating time and effort to ensure that the project is a success. But, how do we measure success (recognizing

that success looks different to different stakeholders)? The grocery store can be commercially successful, but still not solve the food issues. Set forth below are a few of our thoughts on how to create a successful store that helps address food insecurity issues.

- **Trust and Communication** – Several people to whom we talked emphasized that a major key to success is building trust among the residents of the East End communities who will be served by the new grocery store. We believe that an intentional and targeted communication effort would go a long way toward changing the perception that the grocery store is a gentrification project designed to serve the gentrified community rather than low income residents in the area. Further, hiring efforts should be focused on the community. We understand from our interviews that the grocery store plans to partner with CARITAS to teach a life skills program, where graduates are eligible to work at the grocery store.
- **Transportation** – It seems obvious, but if people cannot get to the grocery store, its impact will be limited. Thus, as the project progresses, the developers need to focus on transportation issues. As a first step, there should be a nearby bus stop. But, the developers should also consider more creative approaches, such as a shuttle service and/or a contract with a ridesharing service.
- **Ancillary Services** – One of the themes that ran through the fabric of most of our conversations is the complexity of the issue. We talked about housing insecurity, personal food preferences, lack of food preparation skills and/or tools and a host of other stressors that low income communities face. We understand that the grocery store will have a demonstration station for prepping food, which could help with education. Other ancillary services, like a bank and a pharmacy, would be helpful.

## **Final Thoughts**

There is no one solution to solve Richmond's healthy food access problems, but we know that lots of people are dedicated to tackling this issue. To that end, we have prepared a resource list, see below. Please let us know if you have any questions.

## **Interviews**

- Steve Markel, Markel Corporation
- James Wallace, Virginia Community Capital, Inc.
- Dominic Barrett, Shalom Farms
- Albert R. Walker, III, Bon Secours Sarah Garland Jones Center for Healthy Living
- Chanel Bea, VCU Center on Society and Health
- Karen Wells, American Heart Association
- Isabel Eljaiek, Tricycle Gardens

- Mike Maruca, Anna Julia Cooper Episcopal School
- Norman Gold, East End Grocery Store
- Lauren DeSimone, Richmond Memorial Health Foundation, Health Equity Arts grantee

# LITTLE BITES...

Easily-digestible ways to help

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## Eat...Shop...Patronize...

Eat at **Comfort** (100% of net proceeds go to FeedMore)

Shop at the **East End Grocery Store** when it opens

Order catering for business meetings and events from the East End Grocery Store catering department

Eat at the Front Porch Café at the **Sarah Garland Jones Center**

Order catering for business meetings and events from Front Porch Catering

Hold community or business meetings in the Community Room at the Jones Center

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## Volunteer...Donate...

Plant, harvest, work mobile markets, prepare meals, deliver meals, deliver produce to corner markets, participate in cooking or nutrition education, fund a kitchen kit, so much more...

- Shalom Farms
- Tricycle Gardens
- FeedMore
- Bon Secours Nutrition Outreach Programs
- Ginter Park Presbyterian Church Community Garden
- Renew Richmond
- Neighborhood Resource Center of Greater Fulton
- Health Brigade Greater Richmond
- Fit4Kids
- Mobile Community Garden partnership: Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden/Conrad Culinary Training Center
- YMCA of Greater Richmond