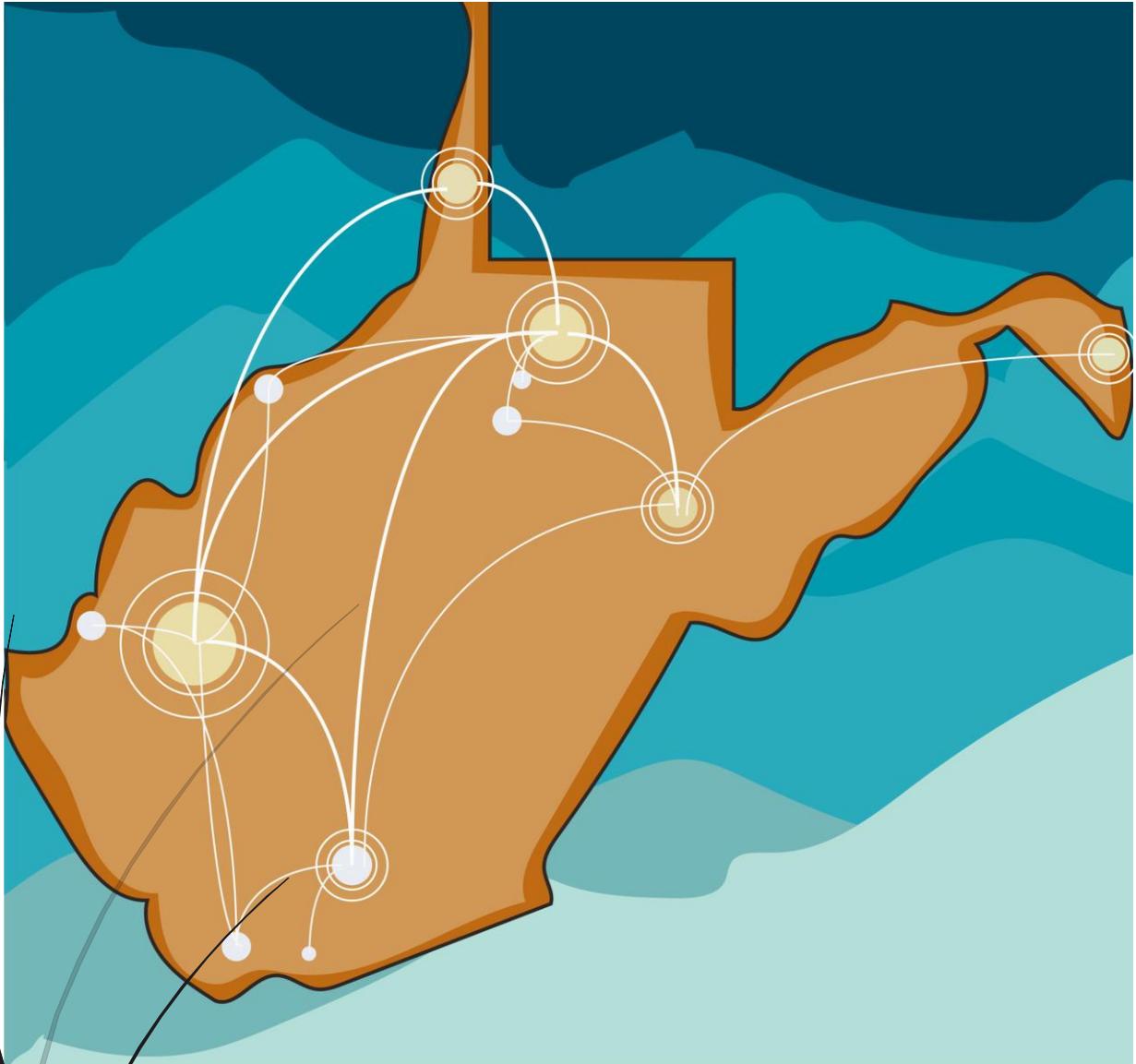


Nourishing Networks

West Virginia Community Food Security Assessment

2016



WV FOODLINK

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INTRODUCTION

Each year we witness a widening gap in the U.S. between those who can access high quality, affordable, nutritious foods and those who cannot. Across Appalachia, where disparities in food access are particularly acute, advocates are working hard to close that gap. From school breakfast and lunch programs to weekend backpack programs, the expansion of community gardening to farmers markets, neighborhood soup kitchens to county food pantries, local groups are spearheading initiatives to improve food access throughout the region. While each new community food initiative represents an outpouring of creative energy to repair our broken food system, they are rarely brought into fruitful conversation. Indeed, constrained by time and place, groups engaged in community food security initiatives often struggle to connect their particular strategic efforts to parallel work carried out by similar organizations, institutions and campaigns. Moreover, when we do meet to discuss and bridge divides, it is often difficult to develop dialogues and shared visions that welcome diverse points of view.

In this report we explore diverse strategies to alleviate hunger and to promote access to healthy food in West Virginia.

DEMOCRATIZING FOOD KNOWLEDGE

One of the key barriers to coalescing community food initiatives stems from a dearth of locally relevant and effectively communicated research on issues of food access at the local, state and regional scales. In West Virginia, like many states, community food advocates struggle to locate and analyze data collected across different programs from farmers markets to food pantries. Differences in research orientation from charitable food assistance, to state assistance to food marketing make it hard for everyday citizens and community groups to synthesize this information and make use of it for meaningful participatory planning. To that end we launched WV FOODLINK (foodlink.wvu.edu) a project of the Food Justice Laboratory in the Geography Program at West Virginia University. WV FOODLINK carries out publicly accessible research to spotlight food resources in local communities and to explain the dynamics and institutions that enhance food access among low-income families in West Virginia.

WHAT IS COMMUNITY FOOD SECURITY?

Community food security refers to a social condition when all people at all times in a given neighborhood, locality or region can gain and maintain access to affordable, safe, culturally appropriate and nutritious foods. Explicit in this definition is the argument that a nutritious diet is fundamental to healthy lives and thriving communities. Yet, implicit in the scholarship and advocacy promoting community food security is a deeper, more fundamental question about *how* to achieve this noble goal in a context where insecurity and precarity is the norm, particularly for low-income and other vulnerable

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households. Community food security advocates charge that ensuring people's access to healthy foods depends upon more than nutritious calories and knowledge. Food security depends on the promotion of socially just and sustainable food systems and includes community-driven strategies for food provisioning that enhance individual, household decision-making power and collective well-being.

While enhancing community food security is indeed a noble goal, there is considerable debate over the strategies to get there. In this report we provide an exploratory analysis of various strategies to improve food access for low-income communities in West Virginia. Our study is informed by two years of social and spatial research assessing food access options for low-income families in West Virginia. We have interviewed hundreds of key informants and surveyed thousands of food retailers, public food assistance programs, anti-hunger charities and emergent alternative food networks. Our goal with this report is to foster a more expansive discussion, represent various forms of knowledge about disparities in the food system, and consolidate different ideas about the barriers to food access in West Virginia. Rather than a focus on a single actor or institution, our study offers an analysis of state, market, charitable and other community-based initiatives promoting food security. While these initiatives are often treated separately, it is our hope that by bringing them into greater conversation, vulnerable families, their advocates and policymakers can more effectively speak across their differences to jointly assess food access problems in our state, and collectively develop community food strategies that promote a more inclusive and just food system.



GIS Analyst Thomson Gross listens as Phyllis Bruce and Suzy Grumelot of Wadestown Food Pantry and Native American Community Center explain their work with families in Monongalia County, WV.

HUNGER IN THE MOUNTAIN STATE

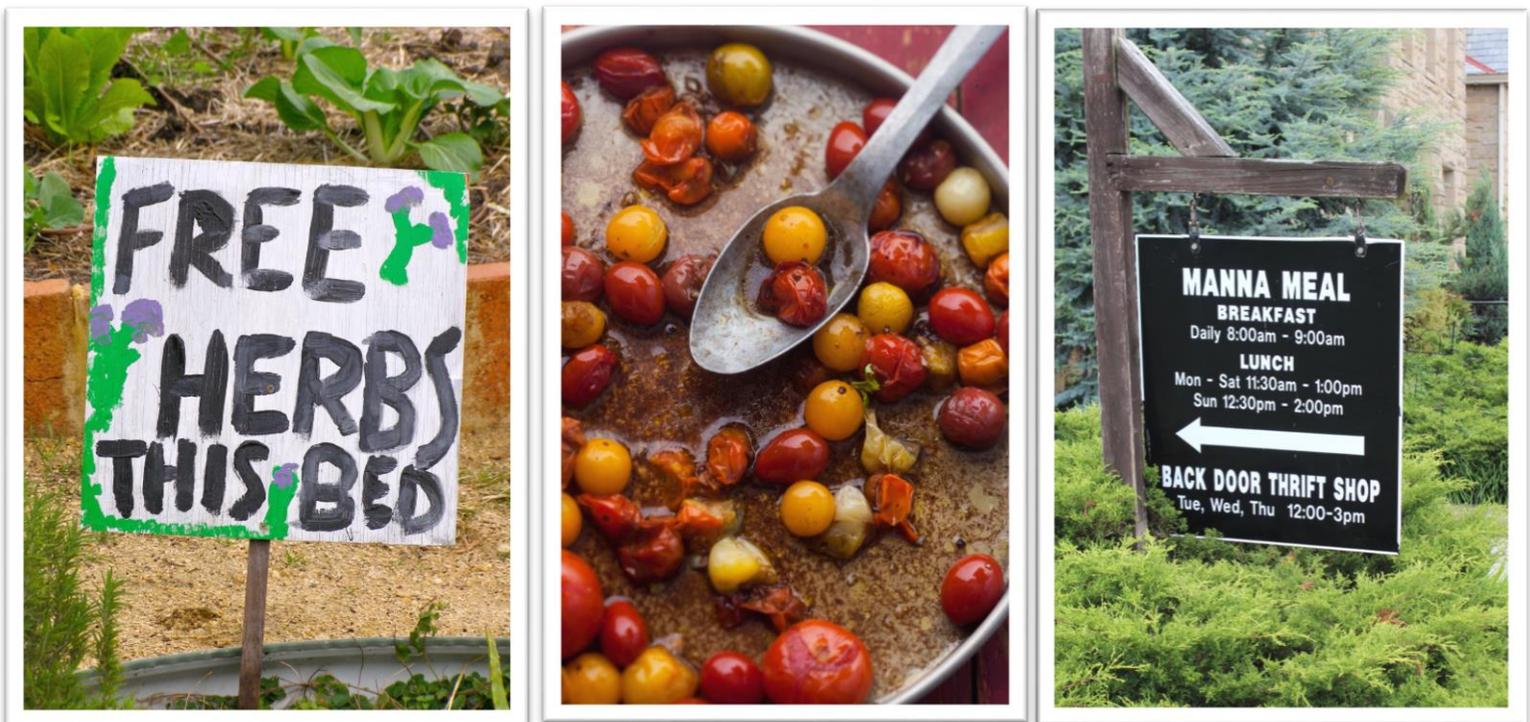
Hunger continues to haunt households throughout the Mountain State. The latest census data reports 18.5% of people living below poverty and the Food and Research Action Council estimates a 24.2% food hardship rate, meaning that nearly a quarter of households did not earn enough in wages to cover food costs at least once over a twelve month period. Why? West Virginia currently has the country's highest unemployment rate at 6.9% and the \$41,195 median household income is the

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second lowest. According to the US bureau of labor statistics there were 19,000 layoffs last year alone. West Virginia was the only state in the nation with negative job growth in FY 2015. In sum, low-income West Virginians struggle to access and afford healthy and nutritious food in large part because the economic situation in many communities is very tough. Declining wages and employment have ripple effects in the food system. So, in addition to promoting sustainable economic development, sound job growth and stable income generating employment, what other strategies can advocates take to improve the livelihoods of our friends, neighbors, co-workers and family confronting this economic crisis in the Mountain State?

FOOD ACCESS IN WEST VIRGINIA

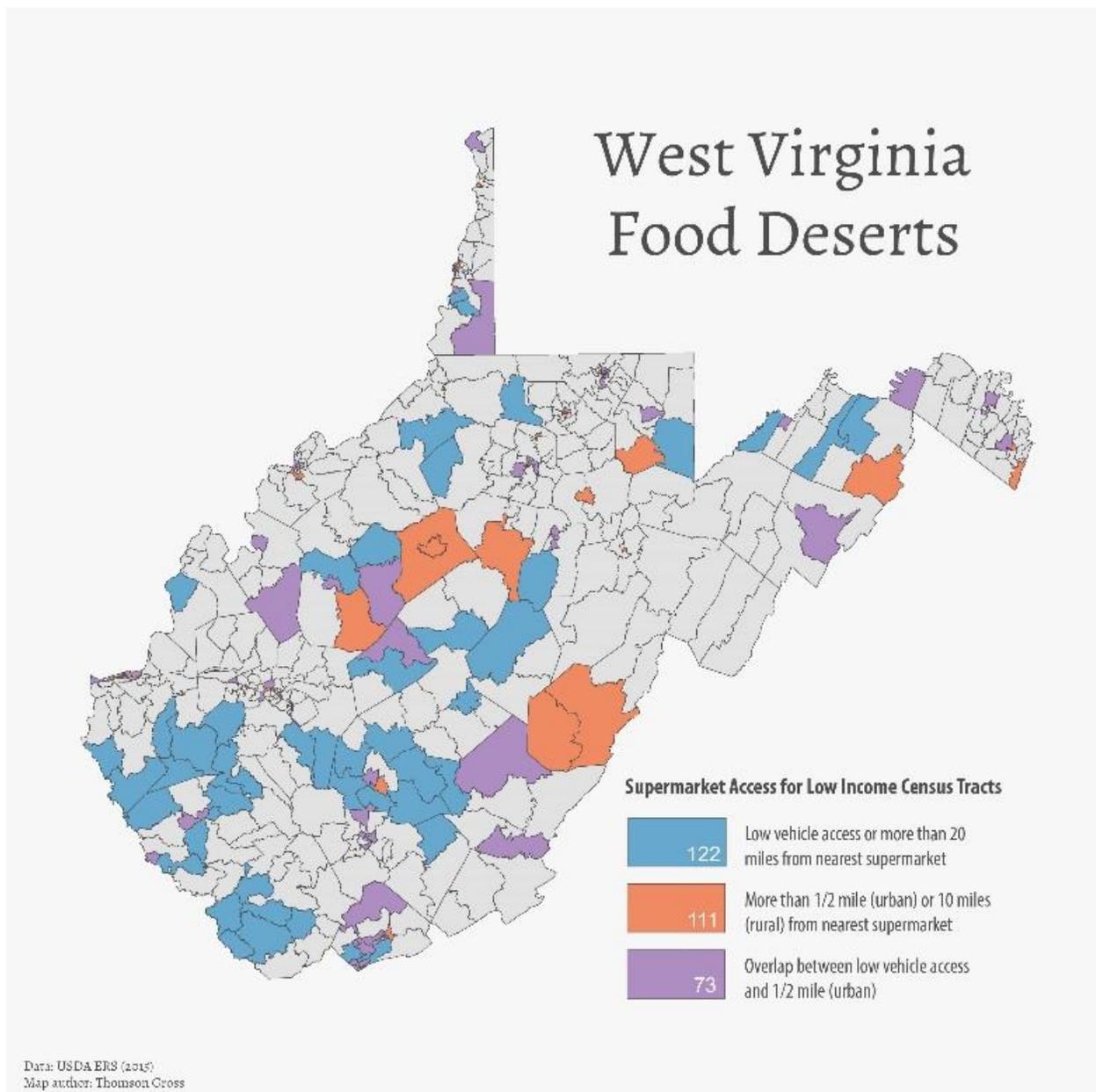
In this report we focus on the problem of “food access and equity”. Many West Virginia residents confront significant barriers to accessing nutritious food. As numerous studies on community food insecurity indicate, households confronting barriers to acquiring nutritious foods tend to live in specific geographic areas - often described as food deserts - where healthy nutritious food is limited, scarce or absent. Named symbolically to evoke a place of dearth, food deserts describe areas in which there are significant socio-economic, spatial and temporal barriers to healthy, affordable food. The US Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines food deserts as “urban neighborhoods and rural towns without ready access to fresh, healthy, and affordable food.”



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What Limits Food Access?

There are numerous social, economic, geographical and historical factors that shape food access. It is driven by such forces as historical economic change, household income, the effectiveness of public institutions to provide assistance, retail competition and concentration, natural disasters, the extent of charitable networks, social discrimination and the capacity for communities to self-provision. In other words, food access is shaped by much more than the availability of food retailers in a given area. Below is the food desert landscape according to the USDA's Economic Research Service.



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FOCUS: COMMUNITY FOOD STRATEGIES

In the remaining sections of this report, we shed light on the strategies employed by people and institutions to reduce food access disparities in West Virginia. The report is divided into four sections (Market Access, State Interventions, Charitable Assistance, and Alternative Food Initiatives) which closely mirror the kinds of strategies employed to address the problem in West Virginia. While we focus exclusively on strategies in this report, at the center of all our work are the people who struggle to access nutritious, affordable, and culturally appropriate food in West Virginia. Indeed, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that it is **low-income individuals and families** who **confront the highest barriers to accessing food**. Any future assessment at the state, regional or local scale must take into account the effectiveness of these strategies, in combination, in reducing access barriers for people facing such social situations and economic conditions across the state.



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STRUCTURE OF REPORT

1. Market Access Barriers

Markets are the primary mechanism through which the vast majority of us source our food. Market access often determines the foods available to us as well as the price and quality of those foods. In this section we outline some of the market barriers to food access in West Virginia and offer an alternative approach to mapping food access gaps in the state.

2. State Interventions

Where market access barriers are concerned, the state intervenes on behalf of low-income households to reduce food access gaps. Our report describes state programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) expand market access. The report also discusses the effects of the recent Feed to Achieve Act which aims to expand free breakfast and lunch in schools across West Virginia. Finally the Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) provides commodities from the U.S. farm sector to the state's two food banks for distribution to their network of affiliates.

3. Charitable Food Assistance

Charities also play a major role in providing food assistance to low income families in West Virginia. The third section summarizes research findings on the emergency food network, made up of charities affiliated with regional food banks. These agencies include food pantries, hot meal programs, meal delivery programs, backpack programs, and shelters that serve people with very low food access. In West Virginia these agencies provide food to some 300,000 people every month. That's roughly 1 in 6 residents.

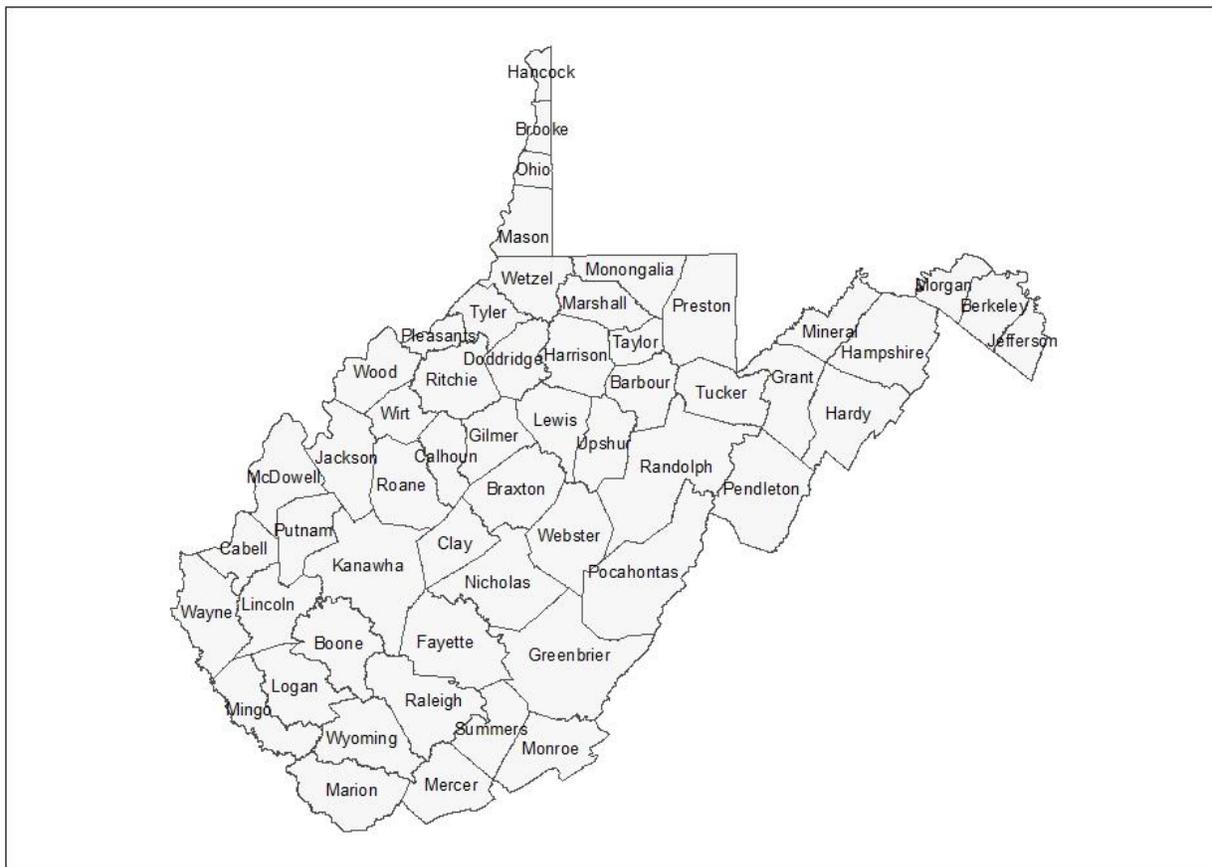
4. Alternative Food Initiatives

The final section explores alternative food initiatives and their contribution toward reducing food access gaps in the state. We highlight these grassroots responses which envision alternative food futures. While often smaller in scale and overall impact they broaden the scope of stakeholders involved in addressing local food insecurity. Many are hybrid initiatives which might include state and private funding, entrepreneurial innovators and charitable impulses, but all of which provide opportunities to expand access from below and from within existing structures and conditions.

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RESEARCH DESIGN

Our study began in the summer of 2013 with two separate entry points. The first was the execution of a Community Food Security Assessment (CFSA) for Monongalia County following the recommendations set forth by the USDA in its CFSA toolkit. The second entry point was the Monongalia County Food and Hunger Committee, a group of charitable food assistance agency directors and their allies. We regularly attended monthly meetings to observe the work of organizing food drives, pooling resources and communicating with donors. We conducted semi-structured interviews with each of the 13 agency directors to understand their individual agency's food sourcing strategies, the challenges each faces operating a hunger relief agency and their personal perceptions of the drivers of food insecurity. At the end of the process we brought the two research activities together by presenting the CFSA to the Food and Hunger Committee and discussing significant findings. Informed by both the CFSA methodology and calibrated by our deepening relationship to the Food and Hunger Committee in Monongalia County, we gradually scaled up our study in the Spring of 2014 to include all 55 WV counties. We began with the 11 southern counties in the Facing Hunger Food Bank (FHFB) service area before moving on to work with the much larger Mountaineer Food Bank (MFB) completing a statewide assessment in December 2015 that includes CFSA's for each county. **Each of our County Level Food Security Assessments may be accessed via <http://foodlink.wvu.edu/learn/county-profiles/>**



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Beyond the State and Market

In addition to studying retail market access and federal assistance programs we also surveyed and conducted key informant interviews with emergency food assistance agencies such as the regional food banks and local pantries as well as alternative food initiatives such as school gardens, mobile markets, emerging food hubs, CSAs and food cooperatives to understand their engagement with food access concerns and strategies they use to address it. Farmers Markets, the most widespread alternative food initiative in the state, received special attention. We interviewed 72 farmers market managers to understand their perception of community food insecurity, their market's engagement with federal food assistance programs, and whether they had developed any links to emergency food assistance networks.

Nourishing Networks Stakeholders

The West Virginia Food and Farm Coalition, Facing Hunger Food Bank and Mountaineer Food Bank were key stakeholders throughout the research process. Concurrently we also benefited from excellent support from state level agencies including the WV Department of Agriculture, the WV Department of Education and the WV Department of Health and Human Services. Finally, we couldn't have completed our work without the collaboration of numerous anti-hunger coalitions who helped us understand the dynamics of household food insecurity in West Virginia.

Limits to the Study

As in every study there are some significant limits to this undertaking. Assessing community self-provisioning activities and the myriad of local production activities taking place across such a rural state in a systematic fashion was impossible. Homesteading, gardening, hunting and foraging significantly contribute to household food supplies in West Virginia but these are not reflected quantitatively in this study. While a number of studies have attempted to assess the number of food producers and their outputs, a full assessment is still a few years away as part of an ongoing effort in partnership with the WV Food and Farm Coalition. Another significant lacunae is the paucity of data on Charitable Food Delivery Programs. Because most of these do not source food from one of the regional food banks, we have not yet collected data on their role and capacity toward filling food access gaps, especially for seniors and other populations with limited mobility. This is a major gap in a state with an ageing population, one we hope to fill in the coming years.

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KEY FINDINGS

1. Market Access Barriers

- We estimate that low income residents in 42% of WV census block groups have low or very low access to a grocery store that supplies sufficient quantities of fresh produce and other healthy foods.
- Household income and low prevailing wages present high barriers to food access. Median household income is \$12,000 below the national average and 18.5% of the population lives in poverty.
- West Virginia currently has the country's highest unemployment rate at 6.9% and the \$41,195 median household income is the second lowest. According to the US bureau of labor statistics there were 19,000 layoffs last year alone.
- The Food and Research Action Council estimates a 24.2% food hardship rate, meaning that nearly a quarter of households did not earn enough in wages to cover food costs at least once over a twelve month period.
- The retail food landscape is highly uneven in West Virginia. Convenience and Small Box retailers make up 76% of the food retailers in the state, yet offer the most limited options for healthy foods. Less than 5% of those retailers offered fresh produce. Grocery stores and Big Box retailers on the other hand tend to be geographically concentrated in larger towns where residents have higher overall incomes.
- Only 13% of all food retailers in WV that are currently eligible to accept federal subsidies are WIC approved. Most of these retailers are big box or grocery stores, usually located in urban centers with lower overall WIC participation rates and greater wealth.
- Based upon a study by the WV Farmer's Market Association, in 2015 we estimate that less than 2% of WV's population shopped at a farmers market or alternative food hub.

2. State Interventions

- In 2015, federal food assistance programs contributed over half a billion dollars in supplemental nutrition assistance to households, schools and emergency food networks in West Virginia.
- 1 in 5 West Virginians receive federal SNAP benefits in WV.
- Contrary to prevailing discourse about recipients taking advantage of federal food assistance to remain unemployed, the vast majority of recipients are working and earning income! In fact, since 2006, West Virginians have maintained an extremely high percentage in SNAP participation among people classified as the "working poor", earning wages yet these are not high enough to bring their households above the 130% of the federal poverty line. In 2013,

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West Virginia had an 88% participation rate among individuals deemed capable of physically working who were in fact employed

- WIC participation rates dipped in 2014. The WIC program supported roughly 82% of all eligible Women, Infants and Children. Access to retailers could be a problem. Counties with more WIC certified retailers have lower average caseloads and participation rates. This could mean that WIC retailers tend to be located in wealthier areas where the need for WIC is lower.
- Although nearly 175,000 children in West Virginia are eligible for free or reduced prices for breakfast and lunch, only about 60% are utilizing these programs. Our findings from this study suggest that The Feed to Achieve Act and the promotion of the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) have resulted in steady increases in school meal participation in West Virginia. We also found that increasing CEP participation for qualifying schools across the state could significantly improve access to nutritious meals for children and more generally households in need.

3. Charitable Food Assistance

- Food charities serve 300,000 West Virginians every month, 16% of the state's population. Collectively these agencies raise around \$11,000,000 in private funds from donors within their communities to run programs, pay staff and logistics costs as well as purchase food to supplement food drives, and those federal and private donated foods that can be accessed through the state's two food banks.
- There are 367 food assistance charities in West Virginia that participate in the Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP). 63% of all food charities in West Virginia distribute USDA TEFAP foods.
- Charitable assistance agencies in West Virginia mobilize some 7,000 hunger relief workers every month to serve hundreds of thousands of food insecure households.
- The number of clients accessing food through these channels over the past few years is on the rise and 35% of food charities in the state began operating after 2008.
- 58% of West Virginia farmers markets surveyed have some sort of gleaning program. Twenty-three markets (32%) had an "official" gleaning program whereas nineteen markets (26%) had an "unofficial" program.

4. Alternative Food Initiatives

- WV is host to a growing number of alternative food initiatives. The impact of these diverse initiatives is hard to measure and assess. We offer an analysis of the potential of these alternative food initiatives to play a creative and integrative role with other community food security strategies.

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Bringing Everyone to the Table

We sincerely hope this report spurs conversations across the state and region about the complexities involved in providing access to safe, culturally appropriate and nutritious foods to everyone, and opens up new questions and ideas around the myriad of local planning meetings that take place on a regular basis around the state. Achieving a more just food system in our region is possible, but it won't be quick, nor easy. We often grapple for immediate solutions to immediate problems. Food access is of course a growing problem, its roots run deep. The problem has not sprung up overnight nor will it be fixed by a single magic bullet policy. Instead we must continue to work together to understand how existing policies and practices enhance or limit access to food and embrace discussions that seek to bring more equity and justice into the many different levels of our food system.

Consider This

How can we improve access to food in our communities? Not everyone shares the same vision or commitment to community food security. There is tremendous debate in our society about health, charity, poverty, fairness and the goals of social change. People do not always agree on nutrition standards. Government, charity and grassroots strategies to improve food access all have weaknesses. Yet, even though we may not always share the same approach or agree about the 'correct' solution to resolving food access disparities, everyone can play an important part in building a more equitable food system. We encourage a "big tent" approach to promoting community food security that invites everyone to the table to identify problems and experiment with creative solutions.

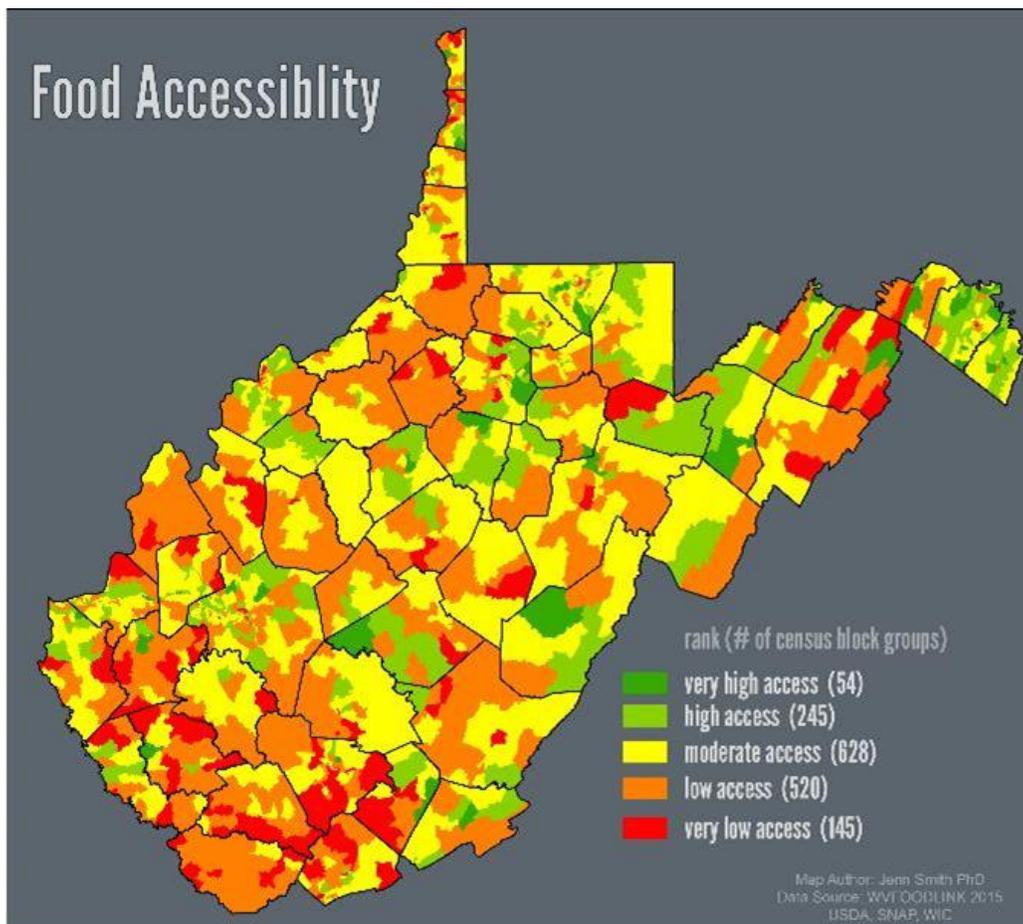
MARKET ACCESS BARRIERS



MARKET ACCESS BARRIERS

MARKET ACCESS BARRIERS

The key factor that shapes food access is the ability of households to earn enough money to exchange for food in a retail outlet. While this may seem like common sense we repeat it here because interventions that seek to close the food gap must take this basic premise into account. In West Virginia, where the median household income is \$12,000 below the national average and 16.5% of the population lives in poverty, household income and low prevailing wages present high barriers to food access. Yet the location of retail outlets, type of retail outlet and the quality of food in those retail outlets also play a determinant role in food accessibility.



We estimate that low income residents in 42% of WV census block groups have low or very low access to a grocery store that supplies sufficient qualities of perishable fresh produce and other healthy foods.

*These findings were based upon telephone surveys with 2,085 retail outlets, as well as census data on income and vehicle access. Our results differ dramatically from the USDA's Food Desert Map as we describe further below.

MARKET ACCESS BARRIERS

RETAIL FOOD ACCESS MAPPING

While proximity to a grocery store remains important for determining access, this map considers both the quantity of available retailers and the quality of the food in those stores. Our Food Accessibility Map used four weighted variables to illustrate the barriers that households face in accessing food. It also calculated food access at a finer scale (the block group) than the USDA ERS (census tract). Food Access is calculated here to reflect: (a) the quality of retailers, (b) the quantity of retailers (c) income and (d) vehicle access.

WV FOODLINK surveyed retailers based on the availability of perishable fresh produce and their participation in state based food entitlement programs namely WIC and. Every SNAP retailer was contacted to determine whether they carried fresh produce or not (SNAP-P = SNAP retailers with produce).

- The **quantity variable** was calculated by multiplying the number of retailers in each category by the quality of the foods available, normalized statewide via a weighted variable between 0 and 1.
- The **quality variable** calculated a score for each census block group based upon the presence of absence of retailer types and was also normalized to create a weighted variable between 0 and 1.
- The **income variable** was calculated based upon the median national household income to more accurately reflect household purchasing power in relationship to other parts of the country. Census block groups were given a score of 0 or 1 based upon whether they were above or below 80% of the national income median.
- Finally, the **vehicle variable** was drawn from the USDA data and disaggregated from the census tract to the census block group scale. Tracts that had high vehicle access were given a 1 and tracts with low vehicle access were given a 0.

Food access at each block group was calculated by the sum of the four weighted variables into a final score between 0 and 4. Block groups that scored a zero are shown in red and have very low food access. This means they do not have access to a quality store of any kind; they have low incomes and low vehicle access. Meanwhile, census block groups that scored between a 3 and 4 are shown in green. They have grocery stores with high quality foods (often more than one), have household incomes above the national median, and have access to a vehicle.

What makes this map different? According to the USDA's Economic Research Service there are only 30 low income census tracts (16 urban and 14 rural) in 19 counties in West Virginia that meet their criteria of a "food desert." The USDA ERS estimates that 62,771 people in West Virginia live in food deserts (46,561 urban residents and 16,210 rural residents). Our research however suggests a much more complex picture of the food access problem for West Virginia residents by turning our attention to the type of retail food outlet and whether they accept the kind of federal benefits upon which 1 in 5 residents depend. By changing the variables and mode of analysis, our map shows a gradient of very high access areas and very low access areas from which to begin considering the scope of the problem.

MARKET ACCESS BARRIERS

FOOD MARKET CATEGORIES

Grocery Stores

Grocery Stores are retailers that primarily sell food and are distinguished from their counterparts by offering a range of perishable and nonperishable items including vegetables and fruit / meat, poultry, fish / bread and cereal, and dairy products. Many grocery stores have a butcher, deli, and bakery.

Big Box Retailers

Big Box Retailers are large commercial retail chains (superstores) that sell a range of products such as clothing, electronics, furniture, hardware, household supplies, pharmaceuticals and groceries (e.g. Walmart and Target). In the past decade, Big Box retailers have sought to expand their grocery options including perishable foods. However, not all Big Box retailers offer perishable foods including fresh

Small Box Retailers

Small Box Retailers are smaller commercial retail store chains that sell a limited range of clothing, electronics, hardware, household supplies, pharmaceuticals and food products (e.g. Dollar General and CVS). While “small box” stores may meet SNAP guidelines, they rarely meet WIC guidelines and rarely carry perishable foods including fresh fruits and vegetables.

Convenience Stores

Convenience Stores are retail locations that stock prepared food items, snacks, beverages, and only a limited range of foods for home preparation. In most cases, convenience stores offer little to no access to fruits and vegetables / meat, poultry, fish / bread and cereal, and dairy products.

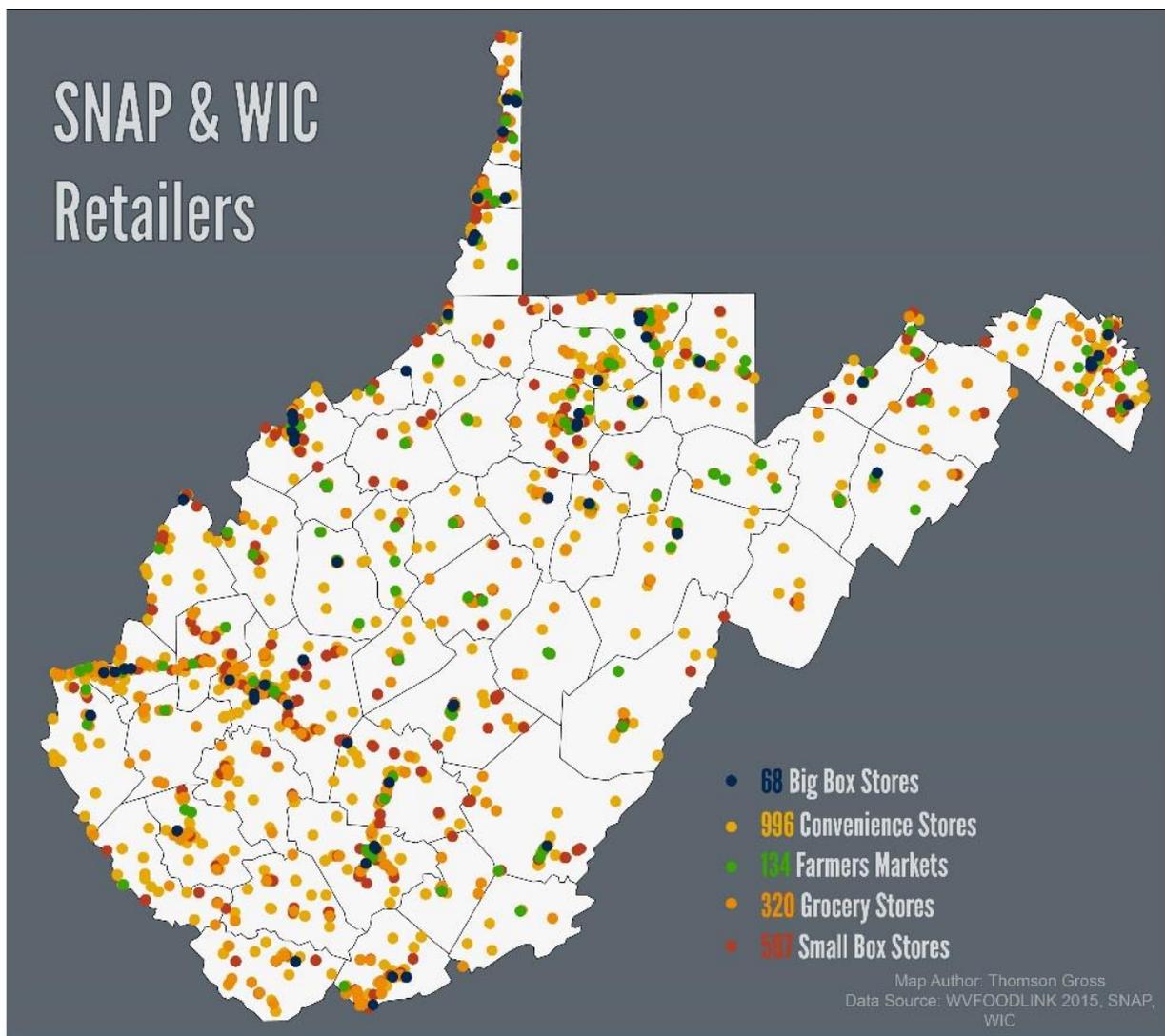
Farmers Markets

Farmers Markets are retail locations in which farmers sell agricultural produce including vegetables, fruits, meats, poultry, and dairy products directly to consumers. While some farmers markets operate in permanent structures on a daily basis, most farmers markets tend to be held weekly or bi-weekly and only last through the growing season. Many farmers markets are beginning to accept SNAP and WIC payments. (Refer to alternative food section for further analysis of WV farmers markets.)

MARKET ACCESS BARRIERS

Uneven Terrain

The retail food landscape is highly uneven in West Virginia. **Convenience and Small Box retailers make up 76% of the food retailers in the state**, yet offer the most limited options for healthy foods. **Less than 5% of those retailers offered fresh produce.** Grocery stores and Big Box retailers on the other hand tend to be geographically concentrated in larger towns where residents have higher overall incomes. This often generates longer travel distances for low-income rural families to shop. However, farmers markets have shown considerable retail growth. While these markets operate only 4-6 months of the year they represent important sites for accessing quality produce and a growing sector of the retail economy.



MARKET ACCESS BARRIERS

RETAIL GEOGRAPHY MATTERS

Only 13% of all food retailers in WV that are currently eligible to accept federal subsidies are WIC approved. Most of these retailers are big box or grocery stores, usually located in urban centers with lower overall WIC participation rates and greater wealth. How do we overcome geographic disparities driven by retail location decision models to improve the availability of nutritious foods?

Retail Concentration

Our research also demonstrates that ownership in the retail landscape in WV is highly concentrated. In the past decade small box retailers have come to compete with smaller grocers and country stores that are often independently owned. Small Box stores (e.g. Dollar General, Family Dollar, Rite Aid...) have similar ownership structures, inventory sourcing models, and market concentrations as Big Box stores such as Walmart. Like their Big Box cousins, small box stores are usually publicly traded companies, and are heavily dependent on economies of scale and wholesale relationships with just a few major food suppliers. These stores offer a paucity of food choices and focus heavily on non-perishable foods with a longer shelf-life. Nevertheless, many of these retailers meet eligibility requirements to accept SNAP benefits. No small box retailers in the state currently meet WIC requirements (see more in Section 2 below).

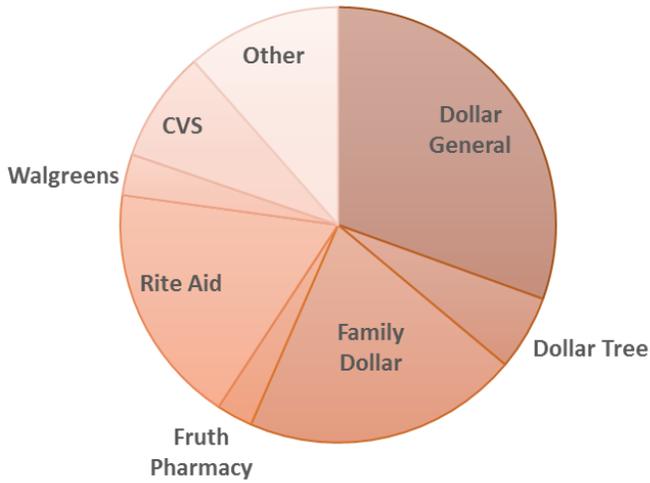
The large number of independently owned grocery and convenience stores across West Virginia may represent a window of opportunity to improve food access.

On the other hand, grocery and convenience stores are far less concentrated than are the Big and Small Box retailers they compete with (see graph on next page). The large number of independently owned grocery and convenience stores across West Virginia may represent a window of opportunity to improve food access. It may be easier for example to incentivize an independently owned convenience store to diversify products on the shelves than to intervene into boardrooms that meet far beyond state boundaries. Developing an effective strategy to support grocery stores and the expansion of healthy options at convenience stores could be one avenue toward reducing spatial barriers to food for many low-income West Virginia residents. Spearheading such coalition-building and policy development is vital so as to head off further food desertification. However, the signs of deepening dearth are more visible each month.

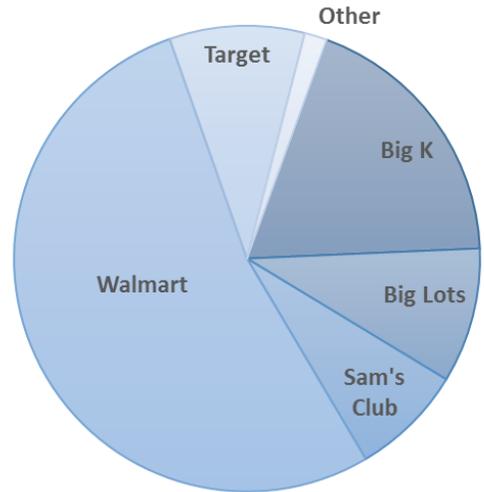
MARKET ACCESS BARRIERS

Food Market Concentration in West Virginia by Store Category

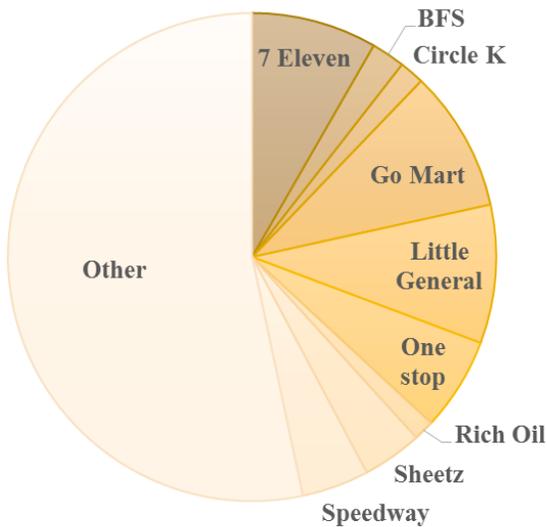
Small Box Stores
557 Total



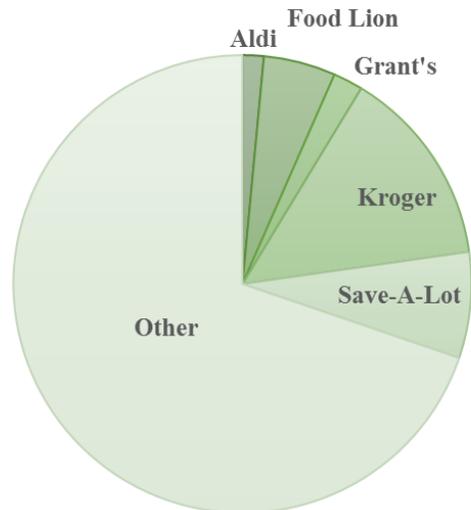
Big Box Stores
64 Total



Convenience Stores
1,035 Total



Grocery Stores
334 Total



MARKET ACCESS BARRIERS

COMMUNITY RESPONSES TO MARKET ACCESS BARRIERS

The absence or disappearance of retailers offering fresh and higher quality foods is a current problem for rural communities throughout West Virginia. Localities facing a reduction in healthy food choices across the state have responded by creating retail alternatives through farmers markets, mobile markets, CSAs and food cooperatives (see section 4 of this report). This budding local and regional food marketing infrastructure seeks to close the gap between producers and consumers by offering locally produced and/or regional sourced vegetables, fruits, meats, grains and dairy products.



Based in Wheeling, WV **Grow Ohio Valley** is a social enterprise that works to strengthen communities by reclaiming vacant lots, growing food there and improving food access in low income neighborhoods. They also run a mobile farmers market that sells food in low-income neighborhoods and senior housing complexes.



Opened as a response to the disappearance of local food retailers, the **Alderson Food Hub** is a cooperative that seeks to coordinate producers and consumers to resolve food access gaps in the Greenbrier valley. The hub includes the Alderson Community Market, the Alderson Green Grocer, a community garden, and educational programming for adults and children.

According to data collected by the **West Virginia Farmer's Market Association**, we estimate that last year less than 2% of WV's population shopped at a farmers market or alternative food hub. While these innovative initiatives still represent just a small percentage of West Virginia's overall retail food landscape, we are enthusiastic about their potential to grow. Improving awareness of these market access initiatives, expanding into new areas and ensuring affordable prices will be vital to grow such alternatives to scale. Many Farmers Markets are beginning to accept SNAP and WIC payments to reduce the access gap. They are also expanding "Two-for-One" SNAP benefits programs, as well as WIC and Senior vouchers programs to address income gaps and actively seek to make healthy and locally sourced foods available to all.

MARKET ACCESS BARRIERS

FARMERS MARKETS AND FOOD ACCESS

In 2015, there were 93 farmers markets in operation in the state of West Virginia. To understand their role in improving community food security we interviewed 72 farmers market managers (80% of the state's total) to understand to what level their initiatives were expanding access to fresh produce among vulnerable households.

Farmers Markets and Federal Assistance Programs

Most markets (71 of 72) accept public subsidies like Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) and Senior Farmer Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP) vouchers as a way to better serve low-income populations. (SNAP and WIC provide monthly benefits to eligible low-income individuals which can be used to purchase food. Seniors receive a fixed amount to purchase produce at farmers markets over the season.) However, SNAP and WIC programs were found to be very burdensome on the market in terms of costs, required training, and the hours needed to run the electronic benefits transfer (EBT) machine during market.

Supporting Struggling Farmers and Low-Income Consumers

Farmers market managers expressed concern for household food insecurity issues but often also described a tensions between creating economic opportunities for struggling farmers and the limited income of food insecure households. These tensions suggests the potential need for public and private subsidies (e.g. from grassroots organizations and/or community foundations) so that the needs of both vendors and consumers can be met. One example would be a "double bucks" program that matches a SNAP recipient's dollar spent at a farmers market with a donated dollar, such that the farmer receives market price but the low-income consumer is, in effect, paying only half price.

Exploring Vouchers Programs and Alternative Currencies

Alternative currencies for farmers markets and emergency food agencies could be used to create community benefits, including improved access to healthy food by lower-income populations. Some WV farmers markets had created a system of vouchers that were provided to local children to be spent at the farmers market. Other alternative currencies, such as Davis Dollars (<http://davisdollars.org/>) and Ithaca Hours (<http://www.ithacahours.com/>), are examples of local currencies that are more wide-reaching than just farmers markets but that provide a way for dollars to recirculate within a community.

MARKET ACCESS BARRIERS

Federal Grant Opportunity: Healthy Food Financing Initiative

The federal government provides grants as well as low interest and subsidized loans to help community organizations and small and medium sized retailers finance and expand their healthy food options. This federal program is directly targeted at reducing the prevalence of so called “food deserts” by developing and equipping grocery stores, small retailers, corner stores and farmer’s markets selling healthy food. It is expensive and risky to carry produce and perishable goods. Refrigeration and spoilage are major issues confronting small retailers in highly competitive industries. This grant assists businesses, local governments, non-profits, cooperatives and other food providers to overcome such barriers!

STATE INTERVENTIONS



STATE INTERVENTIONS

STATE INTERVENTIONS

The federal government is the foremost actor in the promotion of household food security across the country. It provides the majority of its food assistance through the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service (FNS). Federal food assistance programs administered through the USDA contributed over half a billion dollars in supplemental nutrition assistance to households, schools and emergency food networks in West Virginia in 2015. Without substantial federal assistance hundreds of thousands of West Virginia families would lack their most basic food needs. Moreover, in the absence of SNAP and WIC subsidies, more than 2,000 retailers would be deprived of consumer spending often critical to their bottom line.

West Virginia regularly ranks in the top 10 states among participation rates for the Supplementary Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), National School Lunch and School Breakfast programs and the Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP). In our study we explored each of these four public interventions to understand their relationship to household and community based food provisioning strategies. The Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP) a form of food aid specifically targeting senior populations is not currently an eligible program in West Virginia. However efforts are underway to establish that program in 2016.

\$589,541,798

IN 2015, FEDERAL FOOD ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS CONTRIBUTED OVER HALF A BILLION DOLLARS IN SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE TO HOUSEHOLDS, SCHOOLS AND EMERGENCY FOOD NETWORKS IN WEST VIRGINIA

FY 2015 Federal Food Disbursements to West Virginia				
SNAP	WIC	School Nutrition	TEFAP	TOTALS
\$476,134,200	\$26,254,988	\$87,152,610	\$1,499,753	\$589,541,798

Federal Grants: Strong Collaboration Matters

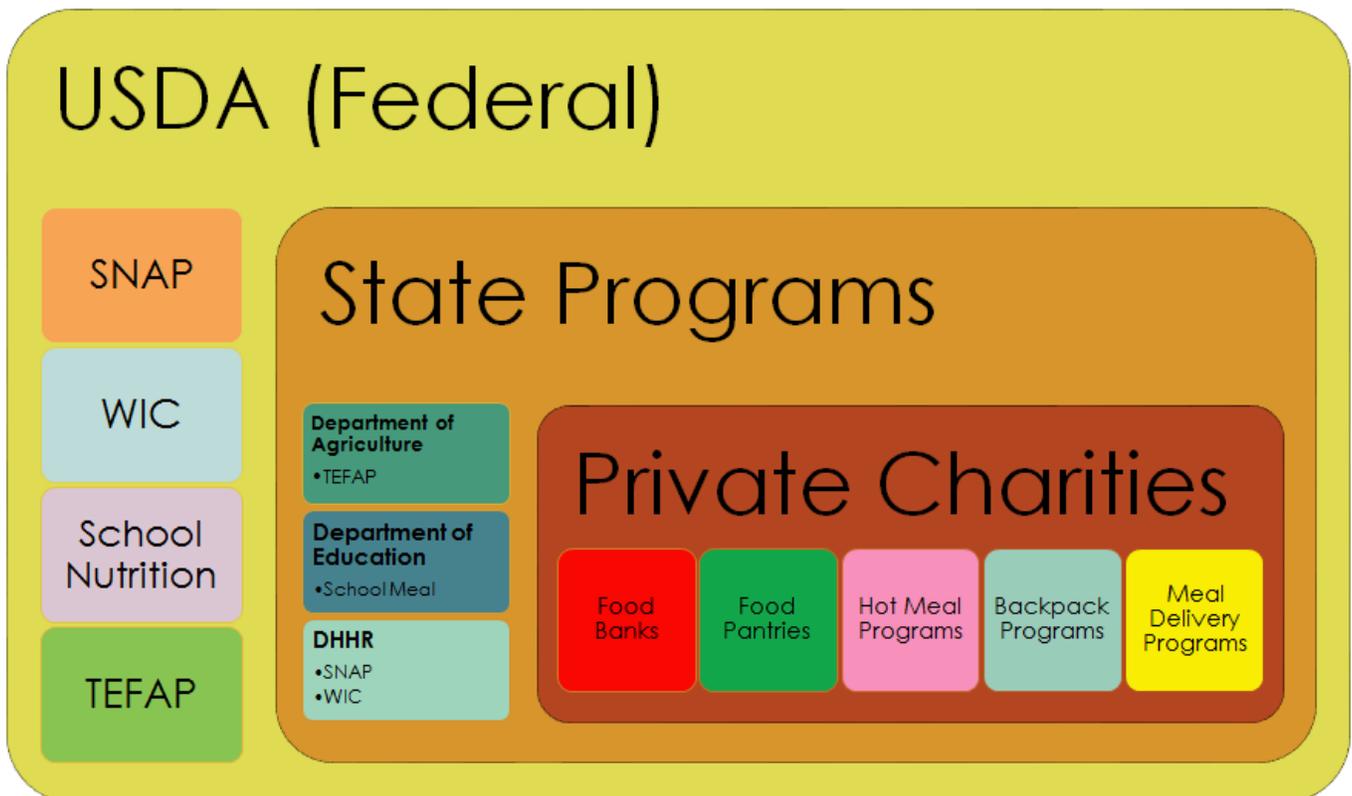
There are several federal funding streams related to community food security. Many of these grant opportunities have never reached West Virginia! Most federal grant proposals require proof of strong collaboration among community stakeholders. In other words, "lone rangers" rarely win awards. Instead demonstrated collaboration and strong letters of support from different stakeholders (retailers, farmers, anti-hunger organizations, state agencies etc.) are key to winning these funds. Want to apply? Find an anchor agency in your area with the capacity to apply and manage these grants and consider participating as one partner among many others. Smaller agencies can get a significant boost for food access projects as subcontractors on larger grants. The WV Food and Farm Coalition is a great contact for exploring opportunities to apply and identifying strong local partners.

STATE INTERVENTIONS

MAKING SENSE OF STATE FUNDED FOOD INTERVENTIONS

Making sense of federal programs at the local level is complex. The distribution and management of federal funds calls on many different agencies, organizations and individuals from state officials to school cooks, social service workers to food bank volunteers. Collectively these programs form the most vital social safety net for 20% of West Virginia's population.

By and large, federal programs significantly expand access to food. But in certain circumstances the rules and regulations that govern each programs can also limit access to nutritional assistance for needy families. The chart below is an overview of the agencies involved in the procurement and distribution of food assistance. Some of these programs provide institutions with money to purchase food in bulk for preparation or delivery to smaller agencies, while other programs provide households directly with cash equivalent benefits to access food retail markets. Federal food assistance programs also provide food to private charities which in turn raise money from private donations to supplement their food allocations (see next section).

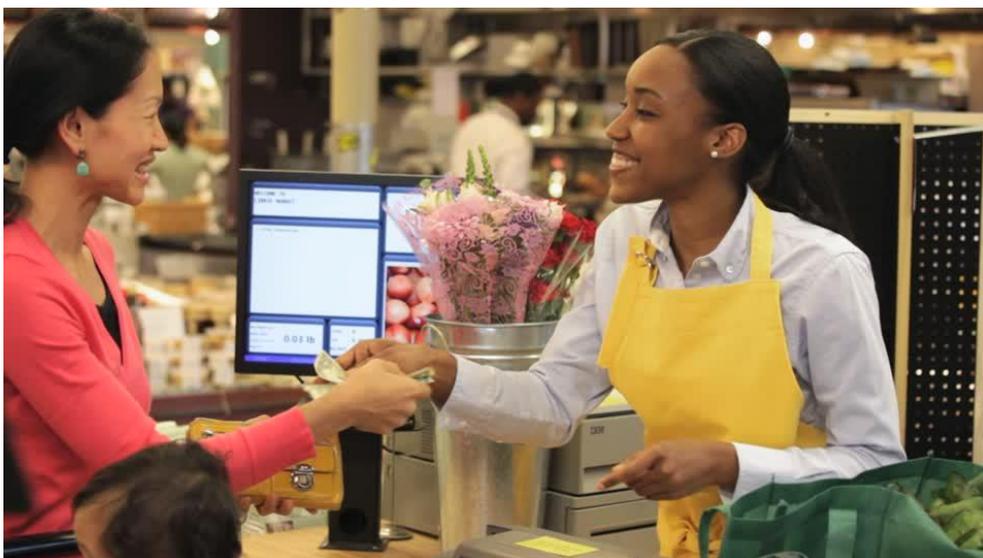


STATE INTERVENTIONS



CASH-EQUIVALENT ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

The two cash-equivalent food assistance programs in West Virginia are the USDA's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC). Individuals and families who qualify for financial support from SNAP and WIC programs use their benefits to purchase food at approved retailers throughout the state. SNAP benefits may be used beyond the state, while WIC benefits must be used in State. It is important to realize that while these benefits are a critical safety net for households who would otherwise struggle to access food, the retailers on the receiving end also profit handsomely from the increased sales and customer base that these benefits provide.



STATE INTERVENTIONS

SNAP

In 2014, 351,000 West Virginians received subsidies to offset their monthly grocery bills. SNAP approved retailers "must sell food for home preparation and consumption" and meet one of the following criteria. SNAP retailers must offer for sale, on a continuous basis, at least three varieties of qualifying foods in the four basic food groups (meat, poultry or fish / bread or cereal / vegetables or fruits / dairy products) along with perishable foods in at least two of the food groups. Alternately, stores must earn 50% of their total sales from these eligible staple foods.

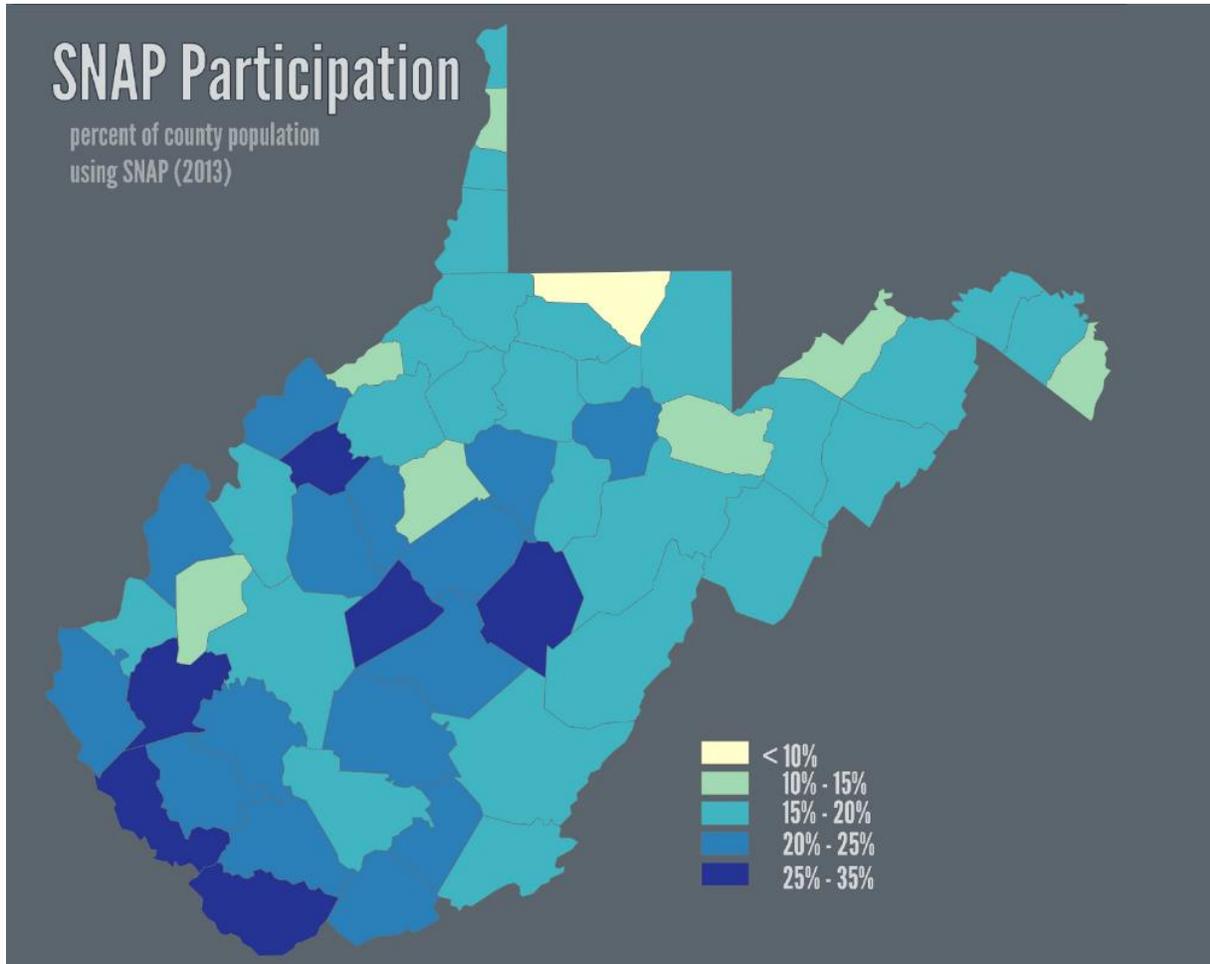
The SNAP program is a federally funded lifeline for millions of Americans struggling with declining wages and rising food costs since the early 1960s. It is the single most important social safety net against hunger and usually the first place people turn when faced with potential food insecurity. SNAP benefits are distributed via an Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) card that allows retailers to receive cash transfers directly from a federal account. Since 2006 West Virginians have maintained extremely high participation rates, especially among those qualified as the working poor. Nearly 20% of households in our state receive SNAP benefits, and of those eligible to work 88% are employed but do not receive high enough wages from their employers to fully cover their needs. In order to qualify for the SNAP program, applicants must work with the Department of Health and Human Services, usually applying directly on site in one of the 55 county offices, although recently online applications have become available. Applicants must be a resident of the State of West Virginia and meet income guidelines set by the federal government, based on household size, income, assets and other household costs such as rent, utilities, child support payments and certain medical expenses. Recipients must also demonstrate that their combined checking and

1 in 5 West Virginians receive federal SNAP benefits in WV.

SNAP benefits may only be used to purchase food for human consumption or for seeds and plants that offer the possibility to grow food in a home garden. These benefits cannot be used to purchase household items such as soaps, diapers and toilet paper, grooming products, tobacco, alcohol or pet foods.

STATE INTERVENTIONS

savings accounts are below \$2,250 or \$3,250 for the elderly and disabled. In sum, SNAP is directed at the most vulnerable households in the state. SNAP beneficiaries receive on average \$119 per month.



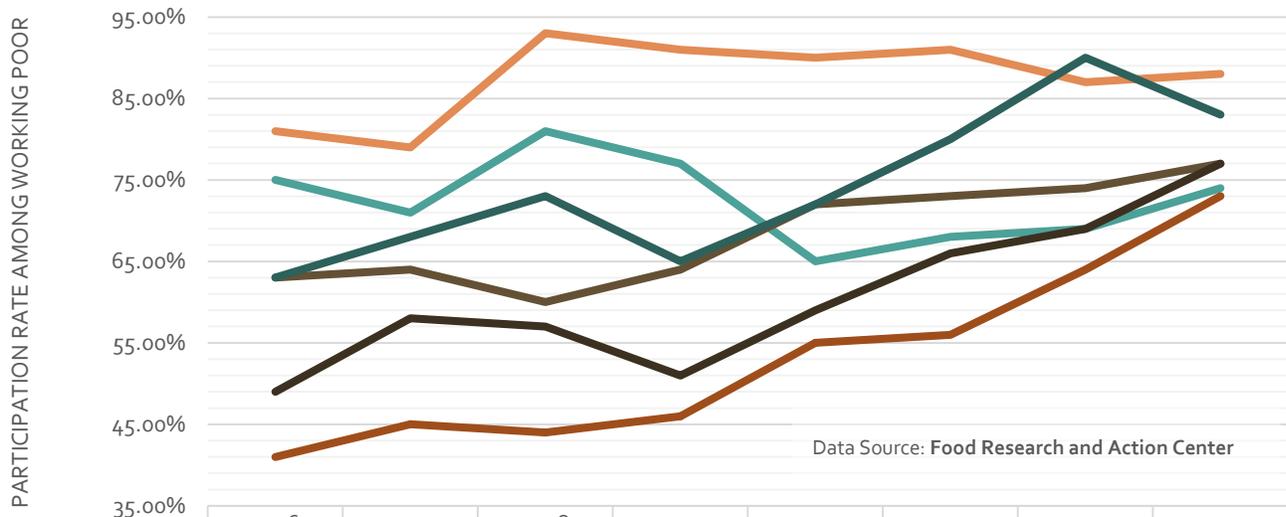
SNAP Access Barriers

For those working multiple jobs or with fluctuating income SNAP benefits can often be a source of frustration since a slight increase in their savings account or a month with additional income disqualifies them from receiving benefits altogether, throwing off food sourcing strategies and routines. It is also important to note that West Virginia is one of only 13 states that have maintained the lifetime ban from SNAP for those convicted of a drug felony. Forty-two other states have passed laws either amending or eliminating the ban entirely as per Section 115 of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act.

STATE INTERVENTIONS

A majority of states across the country saw a decline in SNAP caseloads in 2015 but as the only state with negative job growth, West Virginia participation rates increased. In the past 5 years in fact, West Virginia has consistently ranked in the top ten of all US states in overall participation rates. Last July 369,447 West Virginians received an average benefit of \$119 per person, contributing over \$73 million dollars to the state’s food economy in that single month. SNAP is not only vital for working families, it is also a very important income stream for food retailers across the state!

SNAP participation rate among eligible working poor
West Virginia and its neighboring states



Data Source: Food Research and Action Center

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
West Virginia	81.00%	79.00%	93.00%	91.00%	90.00%	91.00%	87.00%	88.00%
Kentucky	75.00%	71.00%	81.00%	77.00%	65.00%	68.00%	69.00%	74.00%
Ohio	63.00%	64.00%	60.00%	64.00%	72.00%	73.00%	74.00%	77.00%
Maryland	41.00%	45.00%	44.00%	46.00%	55.00%	56.00%	64.00%	73.00%
Pennsylvania	63.00%	68.00%	73.00%	65.00%	72.00%	80.00%	90.00%	83.00%
Virginia	49.00%	58.00%	57.00%	51.00%	59.00%	66.00%	69.00%	77.00%

19.9% of the West Virginia’s population receive SNAP benefits, however contrary to prevailing discourse about recipients taking advantage of federal food assistance to remain unemployed, the vast majority of recipients are working and earning income. In fact, since 2006, West Virginians have maintained an extremely high percentage in SNAP participation among people classified as the “working poor”, earning wages yet these are not high enough to bring their households above the 130% of the federal poverty line. **In 2013, West Virginia had an 88% participation rate among individuals deemed capable of physically working who were in fact employed.**

STATE INTERVENTIONS

Raising the Bar on Retailers: Improving Food Security and Healthy Outcomes without Restrictionist Policies

In recent years policy-makers in West Virginia engaged with concerns about poor health, welfare dependency and perceived fraud risk through restrictionist policies that attempt to set limits on who is eligible for federal assistance programs. Such restrictionist policies include mandatory drug testing, EBT ID cards, the return of mandatory work requirements, and efforts to place limits on SNAP use according to state-authorized nutritional standards. As a general rule the USDA opposes restrictionist policies that might increase food insecurity by setting limits on the choices of food insecure households, especially in low food access states like WV. After years of research on the subject, the USDA finds that there is no conclusive evidence that SNAP beneficiaries make different nutritional decisions than the general public. Moreover, evidence of consumer fraud in SNAP is actually very limited. On the other hand, the USDA has expressed concerned about retailer fraud in the SNAP program, particularly those that do not comply with minimum stocking requirements that meet nutritional guidelines. USDA suggests that greater regulation should be set on retailers (not consumers) that do not comply with nutritional guidelines and ensure consistent access to quality food.

To raise bar on retailers, the USDA has introduced “Enhanced Retailer Standards in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)” which increases the threshold requirement of stocking nutritious foods in SNAP authorized retail food stores. This proposed rule implements the legal requirements from the 2014 Farm Bill for retailers to improve access to healthy food. While such legal requirements may prove difficult for some retailers, the federal government has also created additional subsidy programs available to retailers such as the Healthy Foods Financing Initiative and the Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive to help ease their financial burden and reduce risk.

Federal Grant Opportunity: Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive (FINI)

Supports projects to **increase the purchase of fruits and vegetables using SNAP benefits** by providing incentives at the point of purchase. This is a **direct subsidy to food retailers** to increase access to fruits and vegetables in low income communities, often by doubling

All FINI projects must have the support of WV DHHR and operate through an authorized SNAP retailer

For further details: <https://nifa.usda.gov/program/food-insecurity-nutrition-incentive-fini-grant-program>

STATE INTERVENTIONS

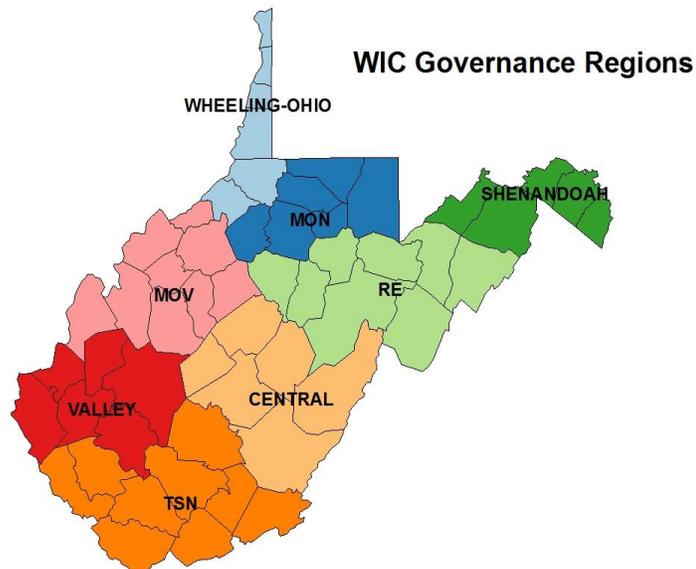
WIC

The WIC program supported 43,000 participants in 2014. WIC approved retailers must meet more stringent USDA guidelines by providing a range of nutritionally appropriate foods such as infant formula; infant and adult cereal; baby food fruits, vegetables and meats; whole wheat bread, brown rice, soft corn and whole wheat tortillas; juice; eggs; milk; cheese; peanut butter; dried beans or peas; fruits and vegetables; soy beverage, tofu; and canned fish. Each retailer must meet minimum stocking and policy procedure guidelines and is monitored by the state WIC administrators every three years to ensure compliance and receive re-authorization. At that time they survey prices, and control for both quality and quantity of foods available in the store

Officially established by US Congress in 1975, The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) is a discretionary federal assistance program for the health and nutrition of low-income pregnant, breastfeeding, or postpartum women, and infants and children through the age of 5. Applicants must meet four requirements: 1) be low-income pregnant, breastfeeding, or postpartum women, or child 0-5, 2) live in the state where they apply 3) have income at or below 185% of the Federal poverty line, 4) and be determined to face nutritional risk.

WIC aims to enrich the diets of participants by issuing benefit packages containing foods rich with proteins, iron, calcium, and vitamin A and C, and to provide nutrition education, counseling, lactation services, health screenings, welfare, and social services.

West Virginia is broken into 8 different WIC governance regions. Each county has its own WIC Office. Where WIC participants can apply and must meet with health professionals.



Data: WIC (2013)
Author: Thomon Gross

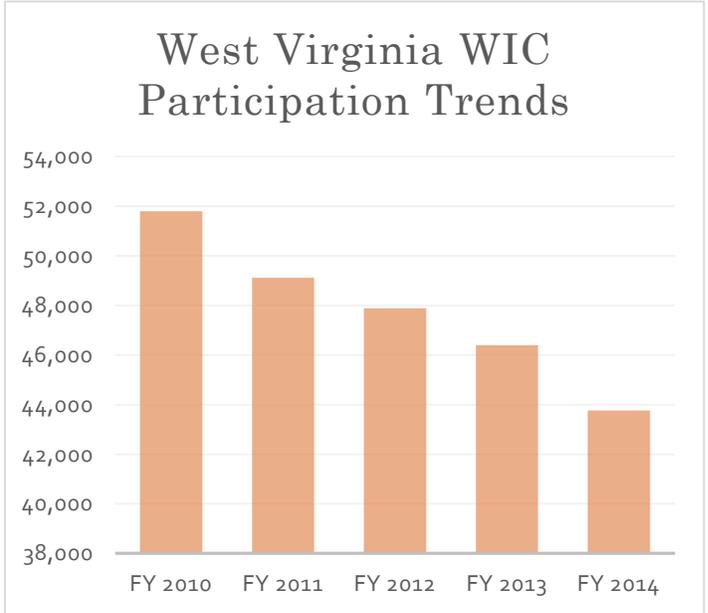
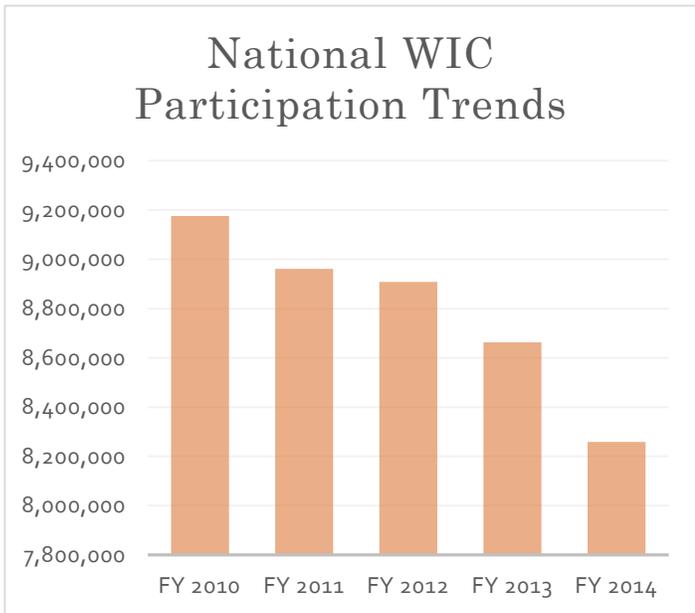
West Virginia University
Department of Geology and Geography

WVFOODLINK

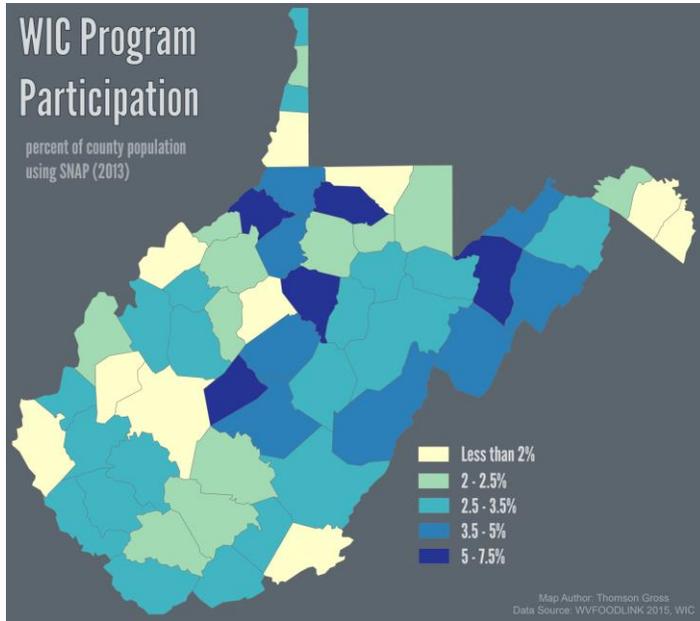
STATE INTERVENTIONS

guidelines for participation are less restrictive. Women are eligible throughout their pregnancy and their first year postpartum if breastfeeding, or first six months if they opt for baby formula. There are varying perspectives on the value of WIC foods from participants based on their location and the difficulties involved in redeeming WIC benefits at a much smaller number of stores across the state. Participation rates are highest in the child's first year due to the high cost of baby formula and foods which are reimbursed by the program for infants between the ages of 0-1. Children under 5 are also eligible for the program but have different food allocations than infants.

WIC participation rates dipped to nearly 42,000 in 2014. Why is there falling participation when food insecurity rates suggest rising nutritional need? Is there a relation between participation, market access and a changing retail landscape?



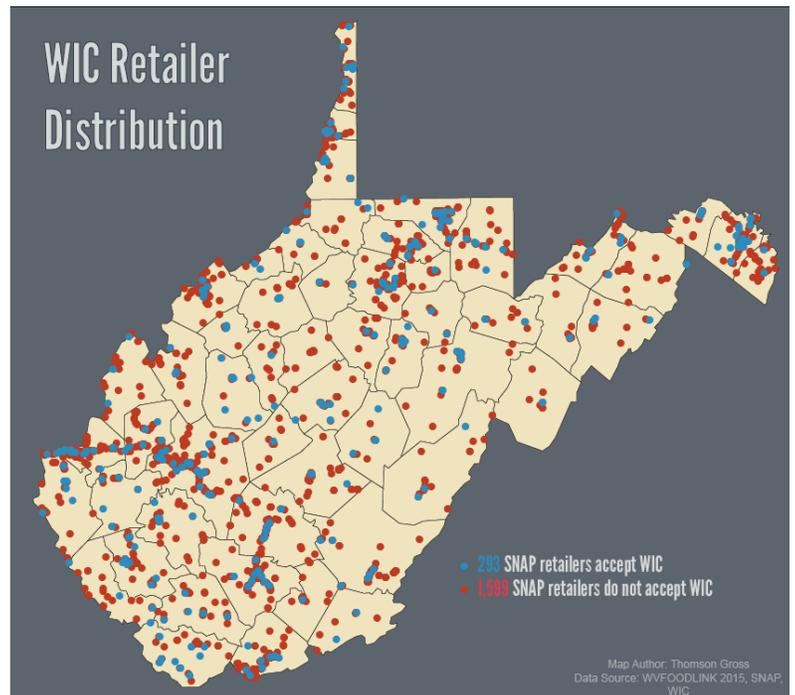
STATE INTERVENTIONS



On average WIC eligibility in WV counties is between 12.5% - 17.5% however participation rates tend to be 5% or less. How can we increase participation rates? What access barriers exist for families applying for or using WIC benefits?

How can we improve participation in the WIC program in West Virginia?

Counties with more WIC retailers have lower average caseloads and participation rates. This could mean that WIC retailers tend to be located in wealthier areas where the need for WIC is lower. How can we encourage retailers to pursue WIC certification and expand healthy options for women, infants and children who are nutritionally at risk?



STATE INTERVENTIONS

COMMODITY-BASED FOOD ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

Commodity-based food assistance programs differ significantly from cash equivalent programs which are designed to improve market access and promote retailing. The state's school meals and emergency food assistance programs *distribute* food directly to people in need via school cafeterias or a network of anti-hunger charities. They do not provide market access but rather supplement low income household's food sourcing by making foods produced by U.S. farmers, processed by US food manufacturers and purchased by the USDA commodities program available to county school boards and food banks. Many of these foods are surplus agricultural commodities, purchased to maintain retail market price points and protect the farm sector from price fluctuations.

School Nutrition Programs

65% of children in West Virginia are eligible for free and reduced lunch at school.

The West Virginia Department of Education therefore is a major player in improving food access among moderate and low income children in some 700 school cafeterias across the state. This state agency manages a host of programs including the National School Lunch Program, the School Breakfast Program, the Farm-to-School Program, the After School Snacks Program, the Special Milk Program, the Seamless Summer Program, the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program, and the Child and Adult Care Food Program which includes meals provided at after-school and daycare or emergency shelters across the state. Our research focused primarily on the two largest of these namely the Free and Reduced Breakfast and Lunch programs.

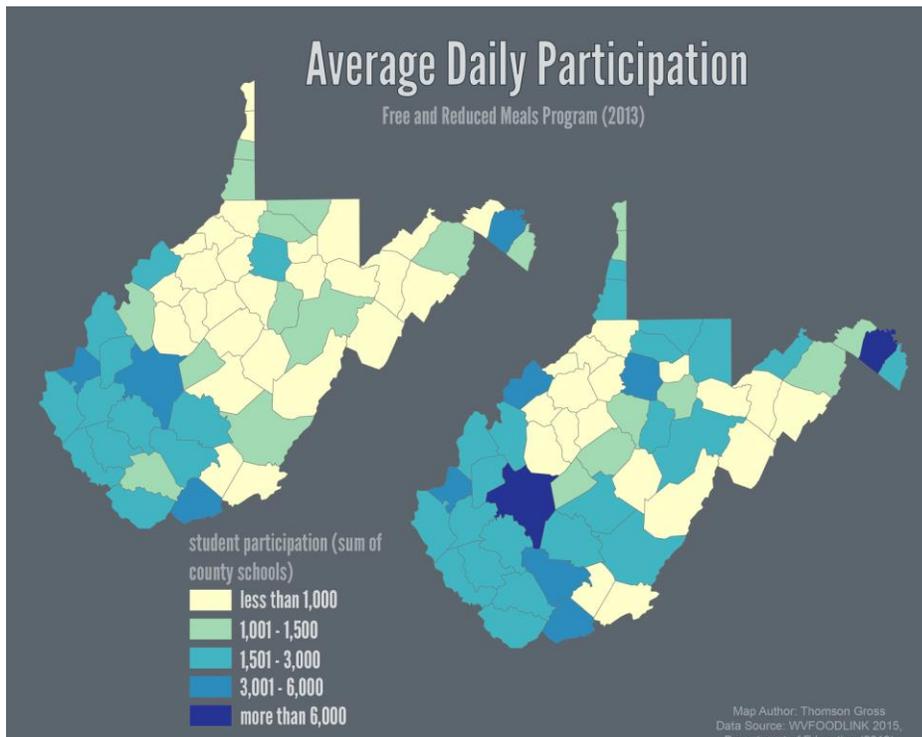
Federal Reimbursement rates per meal	Free	Reduced	Paid
Breakfast	\$1.58	\$1.28	\$0.28
Lunch	\$2.93	\$2.53	\$0.28
Snack	\$0.80	\$0.40	\$0.07

School districts and independent schools that choose to take part in the free and reduced meals programs receive cash reimbursements for each meal served, and also have access to a catalog of USDA

STATE INTERVENTIONS

food commodities purchased by the Federal Government to reduce food sourcing costs. Students from households 130% of the federal poverty line qualify for free meals, those between 130% and 185% qualify for reduced meals. Local school boards set their own prices for full-price (paid) meals, but must operate their meal services as not-for profit programs. Paid meals also receive subsidies from the state (see above table.)

Although nearly 175,000 children in West Virginia are eligible for free or reduced prices for breakfast and lunch at school, only about 60% are utilizing these programs. How can we ensure that all of our children get 2 good meals a day in our schools?



Meals served by schools must meet particular meal patterns and nutrition standards based on USDA dietary guidelines. These dietary specifications and caloric limits seeks to ensure appropriate meals for grades K-5, 6-8 and 9-12. The current meal pattern mandates the availability of fruits, vegetables and whole grains on school menus, and a gradual reduction in sodium content in meals over the coming decade. While school

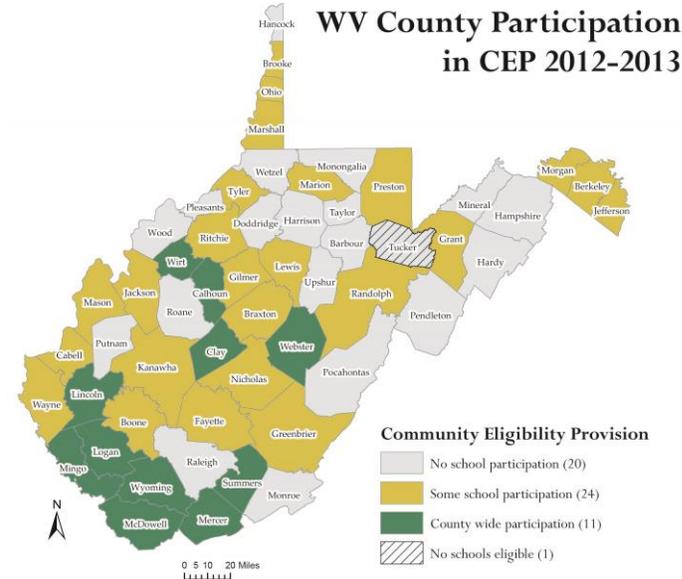
meals must meet federal meal requirements, decisions about what specific foods to serve and how they are prepared are at the discretion of local school authorities. 60% of West Virginia school aged children qualified for free or reduced school meals in 2014 and the state has the highest participation rate in the United States.

STATE INTERVENTIONS



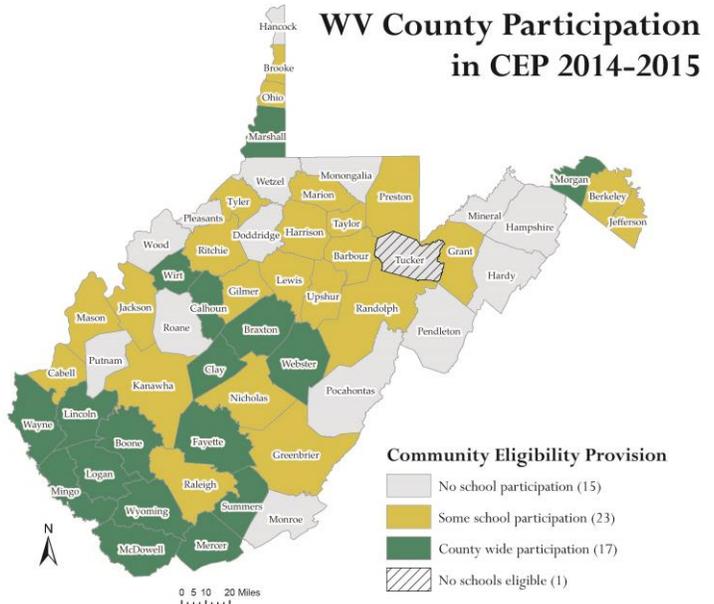
Feed to Achieve: West Virginia Leads Nation in Outreach

High participation rates in breakfast and lunch programs are due in part to the passage of the *Feed to Achieve Act* by the state legislature in 2013 through which local school boards are encouraged to take advantage of the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP). CEP is part of the 2010 US Healthy, Hunger Free Kids Act. It was first implemented in West Virginia in 2012 and has increased program participation each year. CEP eliminates the hassle of paper based applications for parents and reduces administrative costs for county school boards processing that paperwork by drawing instead on existing databases



through WV DHHR to determine student eligibility. Schools participating in CEP are able to increase their funding allocations to include more meals for more students.

Our findings from this study suggest that *Feed to Achieve* and CEP have resulted in steady increases in school meal participation in West Virginia. We also found that increasing CEP participation for qualifying schools across the state could significantly improve access to nutritious meals for children and more generally households in need.



STATE INTERVENTIONS

TEFAP

There are 367 food assistance charities in West Virginia that participate in the Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP). Hot meal programs (e.g. soup kitchens) receiving TEFAP foods must serve any individuals coming through their doors. However, TEFAP foods distributed to food pantries are restricted through a means test. In order to qualify for these government commodities, households must show that their incomes are below 130% of the federal poverty rate. Any household qualifying for SNAP, automatically qualifies for TEFAP foods. TEFAP distributions are meant to provide three days of monthly food supplies to households in need.

The West Virginia Department of Agriculture manages the Emergency Food Assistance Program, a USDA program that distributes agricultural commodities to the state's two food banks for distribution to their affiliate agencies throughout the state. These foods are purchased by the federal government from private food industry contractors, often to stabilize prices in particular agricultural sectors. As such, TEFAP foods, while a critical source of nutrition for hundreds of thousands of households accessing food pantries and hot meal programs every month, are not always consistent, nor the easiest foods from which to build complete menus.

While TEFAP is the smallest state food assistance program, its presence serves to subsidize and mobilize an entire network of emergency food assistance providers across the state who, in turn, supplement these foods with their own sourcing strategies either through food drives, retail purchases or partnerships with retail donation programs through regional food banks. The following section describes the role of these emergency food networks in household food access strategies across the state.



CHARITABLE FOOD ASSISTANCE



CHARITABLE FOOD ASSISTANCE

CHARITABLE FOOD ASSISTANCE

The charitable or emergency food assistance network in West Virginia represents a combination of faith based charities and not-for-profits that provide free food to those who cannot access enough through market, public assistance or other mechanisms. No one food charity exactly resembles another, yet combined they supplement the food needs of **300,000 West Virginians every month, 16% of the state's population**. Collectively these agencies raise around **\$11,000,000 in private funds** from donors within their communities to run programs, pay staff and logistics costs as well as purchase food to supplement food drives, and those federal and private donated foods that can be accessed through the state's two food banks. Over **7,000 volunteers** contribute what amounts to hundreds of thousands of hours of labor on a yearly basis to keep the emergency food network operating in the state. The number of clients accessing food through these channels over the past few years is on the rise and **35% of food charities in the state began operating after 2008**. Food charities are very well positioned to understand the critical food needs of food insecure families in their particular communities and the multiple factors leading to food access disparities there.

The size, service area and mission of these charities varies tremendously but each involves a high level of administrative oversight, including fundraising, budgeting, logistics, volunteer recruitment, and reporting back to funders and partners.

GET INVOLVED

Most counties have a monthly drop off site where food assistance charities affiliated with one of the state's two food banks receive their food orders and USDA-TEFAP allotments. Unloading the truck takes a while and this is a great time to 'hang out' and discuss the food insecurity situation in your county, the existing networks addressing it and how you might begin to plug into that work. Contact your regional food bank to determine when and where the next delivery will take place. Help unloading the truck, and stocking shelves back at the agency is always welcome too!

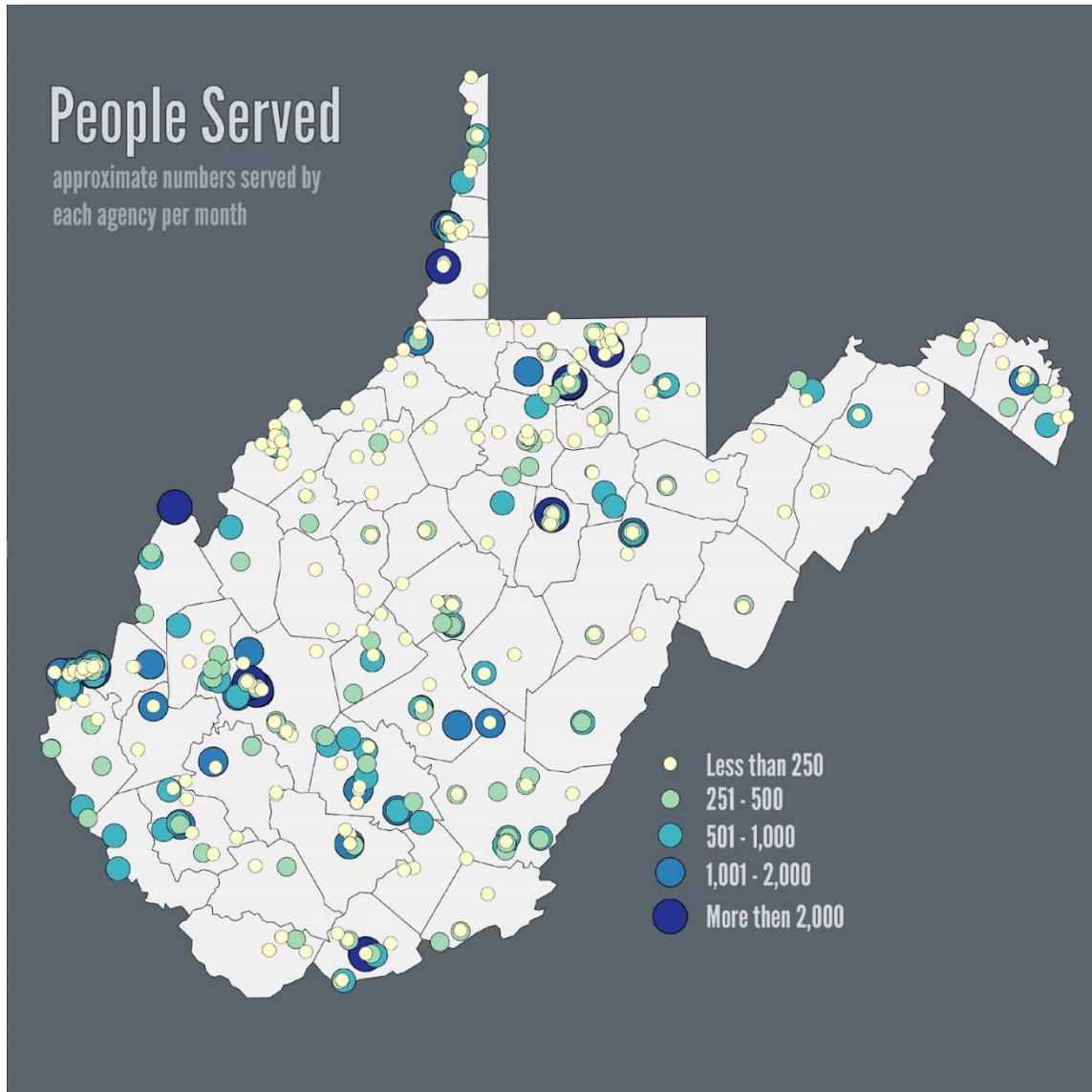
These complex entities are most always underfunded and understaffed and are highly dependent on their social networks of volunteers and donors to continue providing services on a daily, weekly or monthly basis. While we've organized community food assistance programs into five broad categories based on the roles that they fill within the overall emergency food network, we understand each to be highly unique, addressing critical food needs differently in their community based on geographic contexts, populations served and the resources at their

disposal.

Common to all local food charities is a deep sense of commitment to alleviating hunger in the present. Most charities do not have the resources nor the time to plan for the future. However, as we have learned from effective anti-hunger programs, collaboration and

CHARITABLE FOOD ASSISTANCE

planning are key to sustainability. We encourage anti-hunger groups to coordinate rather than compete. Form a local coalition to develop joint projects, programs and fundraising.



FOOD BANKS

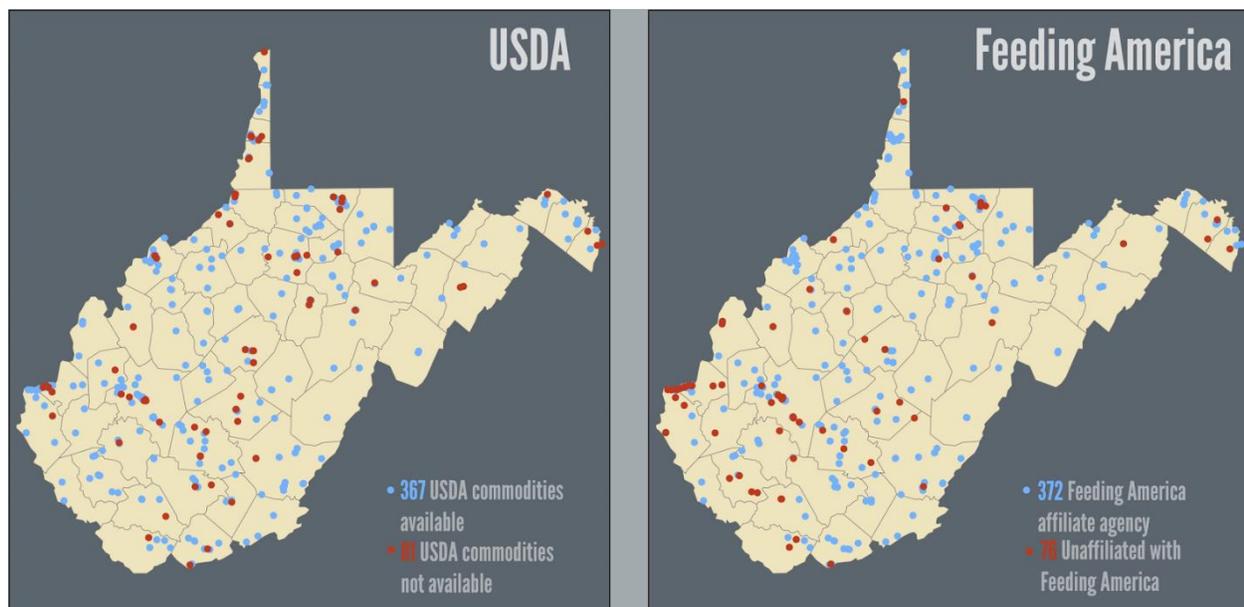
Food Banks are the food hubs of the charitable network. Most food charities in West Virginia source at least a portion of their food from one of the state's two food banks. While there are a number of charitable food assistance programs unaffiliated with either of the two flagship food banks our findings on charitable food assistance networks here concern the nearly **600 agencies** that are affiliated. The Facing Hunger Food Bank in Huntington, WV distributes food to 11 southern counties, and Mountaineer

CHARITABLE FOOD ASSISTANCE

Food Bank in Gassaway, WV distributes food to 48 counties. Both participate in the USDA commodities distribution program and the Feeding America corporate food donation program.

USDA commodities are purchased by the federal government through The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) specifically for national hunger relief efforts. USDA foods are currently distributed at no cost to the individual agencies, although the food banks must raise private funds to subsidize their processing costs as state reimbursements are not sufficient. Food Charity directors coordinate monthly pick-ups with the food banks for their USDA allocation and must report distribution metrics back to the food bank, who reports back to the state. Charity Directors also insure that clients qualify for USDA food based on the state's guidelines. Any household qualifying for SNAP benefits also qualifies for USDA commodities distributed through a food charity.

63% of all food charities in West Virginia distribute USDA TEFAP foods.



Both West Virginia food banks are *Feeding America* affiliates a partnership that enables them to develop working relationships with corporate food networks to absorb and redistribute their excess inventories. The vast geographical area covered by the two food bank networks makes it logistically difficult to pick up food from every participating retail location in the state. To cover the costs of pickup and distribution food banks charge a nominal fee from their affiliates for each pound of non USDA food processed. Certain high capacity food charities affiliated with the food bank are authorized to pick up food directly from retailers in their service area up to three times per week. The "agency enabled" food assistance charities participating in retail food pick-ups must allocate

CHARITABLE FOOD ASSISTANCE

significant volunteer time and resources toward the endeavor. Food from retailers is often unsorted and perishable. Agencies must have sufficient cold storage capacity to keep it until their next food distribution day, or distribute it immediately. Charities that pick up food directly from retailers must report the food quantity and type back to the food bank for accounting purposes. It is unclear whether this food gets distributed evenly among food charities and their clients. Because the effort at

spread nor well-coordinated, we have
ce of contention among regional food



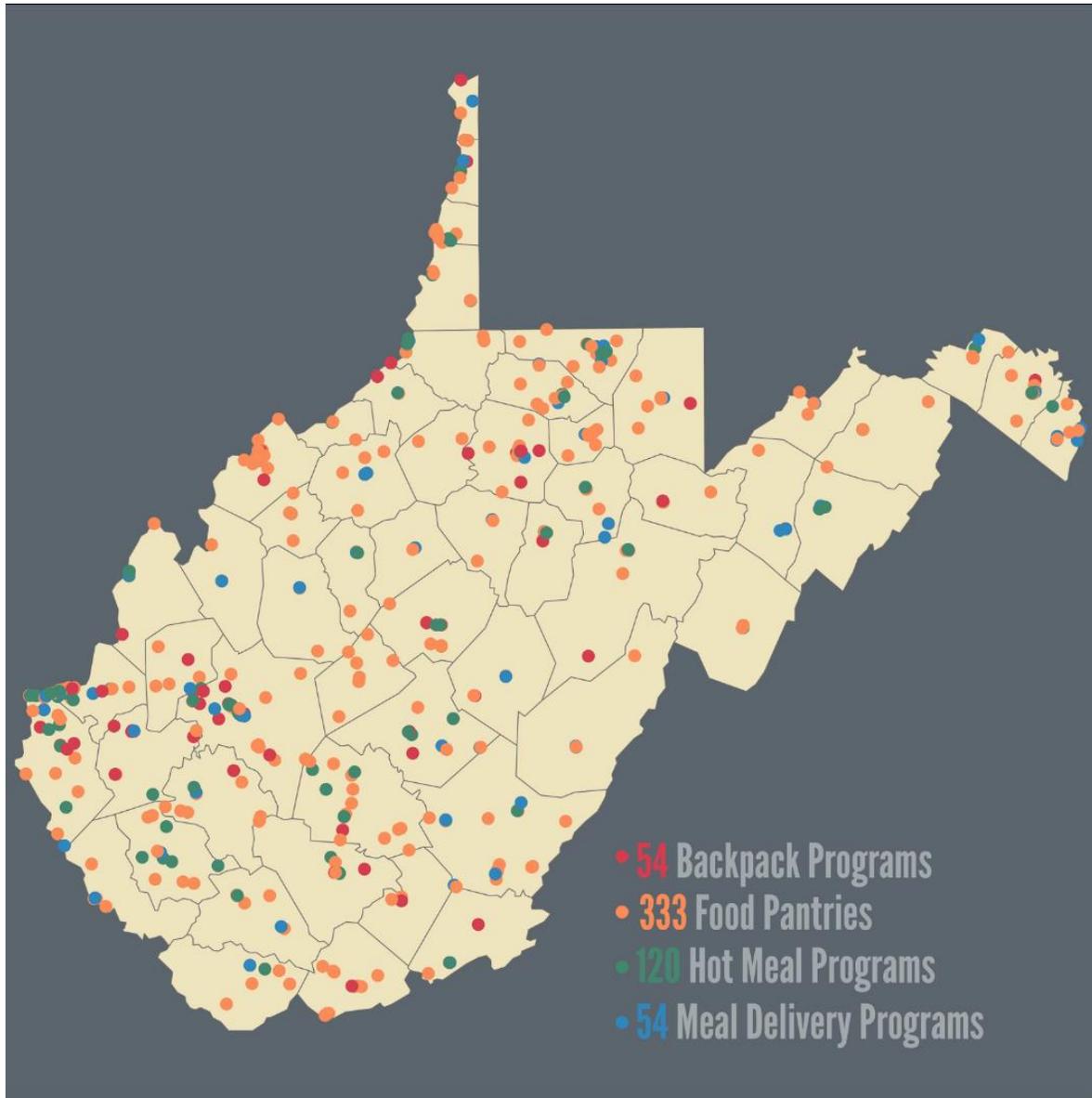
Food Banks receive food from the USDA, Feeding America and other regional partners to distribute to local charities. The USDA provides about 30% of food bank operating budgets, the rest of the administrative and logistical funds necessary to continue moving millions of pounds of food every day must be raised from private sources. Individual cash donations and grants from foundations are critical to the food banking economy. As West Virginia’s economy contracts Food Banks are coming under significant strain as private funding sources across the state have also been significantly reduced, just as the need for food assistance from these channels is increasing.

ANCHOR AGENCIES

The work of the charitable food assistance networks are also supported by “anchor agencies”, organizations that act as a hub for community engagement. Examples include but are not limited to: Regional Community Action Agencies (CAA), Family Resource Networks (FRNs) and Family Resource Centers (FRCs), local clerical organizations, local food advocacy coalitions, hospitals and public schools. Anchor agencies often have more capacity (e.g. staff, meeting space) to help coordinate anti-hunger initiatives at the county or regional level.

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MAPPING THE EMERGENCY FOOD NETWORK



The emergency food network serves up to 300,000 people per month in West Virginia. While often only providing an individual meal or a 3 day supply of food, these agencies are lifelines in for many families struggling to put food on the table. We estimate that \$11 million was charitably raised in WV in 2015 to distribute and prepare 10 million pounds of emergency food.

CHARITABLE FOOD ASSISTANCE

TYPES OF CHARITABLE FOOD ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

Food Pantries

Food pantries typically serve between 150 and 300 individuals per month, often regular clients. **74% do not have a paid staff member** and are highly dependent on volunteers to run their programs. Food pantries maintain extremely **variable hours of operation**. Most have **prerequisites** before clients can access food, including intake forms, income eligibility criteria or specific service areas. Pantries participating in the USDA commodities program are required to monitor eligibility based on very specific guidelines. Some food pantries set up additional criteria such as requiring referrals through a third party agency to streamline regional monitoring of food assistance activities. Other pantries are place and population specific serving a particular community, while others go out of their way to serve anyone in need of assistance. The form that distributions take also vary considerably. Some distribute pre-prepared boxes of food while others allow their clients to 'shop' through a well ordered system of food allocation. Pantry budgets also vary widely based on levels of congregational or community support and the capacity of the director to raise additional funds. Some have no budgets and rely solely on USDA commodities while others have hundreds of dollars to spend on food every month. Many food pantries have 'merged' over the past few years and pool resources in an attempt to increase their overall service capacity and streamline anti-hunger efforts in the community. This comes with benefits and drawbacks as the number of pantries and locations to receive food decrease but food quality and infrastructure are often improved as a result. In sum, the food quality at each pantry varies based on a variety of factors as does the potential of people to access food there when in need.

Hot Meal Programs

Hot Meal programs serve prepared meals on a regular, often daily, basis. These charities are usually set in urban areas, serving a population that may not have regular access to a kitchen. Hot Meal programs that source food from regional food banks vary in size and purpose. Some are standalone programs, while others are part of daycares, family crisis centers and shelters. Some are exclusive to defined populations while others are open to the general public and welcome anyone needing a meal. Hot Meal programs usually have at least one paid staff member preparing food and organizing volunteers. The infrastructure required to run a hot meal program is significant including kitchen facilities approved by the regional health department, cold storage capacity and space to seat hundreds of clients. Due to the sheer volume of food processed, hot meal charities usually have much higher operating and food purchasing budgets.

CHARITABLE FOOD ASSISTANCE

Meal Delivery Programs

Meal Delivery programs are intended for homebound clients, usually the elderly or infirm. Meals are prepared in a central location and distributed across the agency's service area directly to client's homes. Programs vary in size and scope, some serve multiple counties, while others concentrate on specific neighborhoods. All are dependent on volunteer networks who serve in different capacities either sourcing food, preparing food, delivering meals, or coordinating. Meal Delivery programs in West Virginia are currently near capacity and in many counties there is a waiting list to access regular meal deliveries. Their food sourcing strategies are not exclusive to the state's two regional food banks and more research is needed to fully understand the scope and impact of these charities on household food access in the state.

Backpack Programs

Backpack Programs provide a two day supply of food to children enrolled in school for weekends or over extended school breaks. Each backpack program is responsible for sourcing, purchasing, packing and distributing 'backpacks' to their partner schools, and usually communicates with the school principal in an effort to organize their charitable activities to reduce social stigma for the children receiving assistance. Local charities and volunteer networks implement and execute backpack programs through the support of local faith groups and/or private individuals. Some run programs in multiple schools, while others choose to partner with only one. USDA commodities are not appropriate for backpack programs and many of these use their own funds to purchase food items. Food Banks will at times purchase in bulk specifically for backpack programs to help them reduce the cost and take advantage of economies of scale.

FARMERS MARKET GLEANING PROGRAMS

An old-fashioned concept, gleaning refers to harvesting unwanted or leftover produce from farms or gardens. Volunteers collect leftover fruits and vegetables from farms, gardens, or farmers markets and deliver them to homeless shelters, soup kitchens, and food pantries, as well as senior centers and low-income homes. We use the term gleaning here to refer to any farmers market program that provides free food, donated by farmers market vendors or customers, to local emergency food organizations.

We considered official gleaning programs those in which market managers were able to articulate the organization (soup kitchen or food pantry) they donated to, on what days of the month, and the

CHARITABLE FOOD ASSISTANCE

logistics (who, when, where) of getting the produce to the pantry. These programs took place at least once a week. Unofficial gleaning programs were those that are inconsistent and do not necessarily take place around a set schedule, or that occur less often than once a week. Also, the plans for these programs may not be clear or well-organized. For example, one market claimed to not have a gleaning program but an individual would come and ask for leftovers and then distribute them to seniors in the community. We considered this to be an unofficial gleaning program.

Generally speaking, farmers markets that are larger and more well-established employ more strategies to improve community food security, specifically gleaning programs. All of the ten markets that we classified as well-established had either an official (60%) or an unofficial (40%) gleaning program. Well-established markets have a large number of vendors and attract a large number of shoppers, have more revenue, and are overall more rooted in the community. These qualities give them more leeway to try out different programs in order to better serve the needs of low-income, food insecure individuals. However, even among the 62 markets not considered to be well-established, a majority (51%) had some sort of gleaning program; 27% had an official gleaning program and 24% unofficial.

A majority (58% or 42 markets) of the West Virginia farmers markets surveyed have some sort of gleaning program. Twenty-three markets (32%) had an "official" gleaning program whereas nineteen markets (26%) had an "unofficial" program.



Morgantown and Berkeley Springs Farmers Markets were found to have the largest, most robust gleaning programs in the state. These well established markets have a variety of factors that make their markets and gleaning programs successful. These farmers markets have been in existence for at least 5 years, are located in town or along a well-traveled road, have more than 15 vendors that sell at the market

each week, have EBT machines and accept SNAP and WIC benefits, and have an updated website.

CHARITABLE FOOD ASSISTANCE

Barriers to Gleaning

There are barriers to making gleaning programs successful. This was especially true for small, less well-established markets. The largest barrier was simply not having enough excess food to donate. Many farmers market vendors run very small operations and often sell out before the market is over. Having excess produce available for donation would require an expansion of their current level of production which involves risk. In addition, many of these small farmers may want to use, or preserve for their own use, any produce leftover at the end of the market day. Farmers also are trying to earn income from their production and may not be financially able or willing to give their produce away.

One possible incentive for farmers to donate produce to the emergency food system would be tax credits. Although, currently farmers may reduce their income for tax purposes by taking into account any donations made to charitable organizations, such as produce donations to food pantries, their farm income may be so small that this is not much of an incentive. A tax credit could more significantly and directly reduce a farmer's tax burden and thus provide a greater incentive for donating products. The WV Food and Farm Coalition introduced a "Farm to Food Bank" bill into the 2016 WV Legislative session but given the current budget deficit it never made it to the floor for a vote. This bill would have provided state-level tax credits for agricultural donations to emergency food providers.

Logistics, including time, effort, infrastructure, cost of delivery, and coordination of getting produce to food pantries or soup kitchens is another important barrier. Pantries and soup

FARMERS MARKET GLEANING PROJECTS

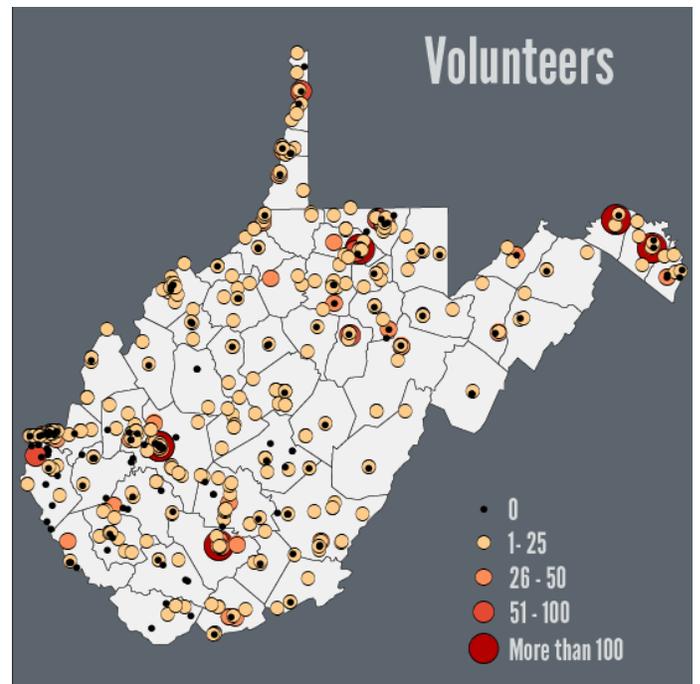
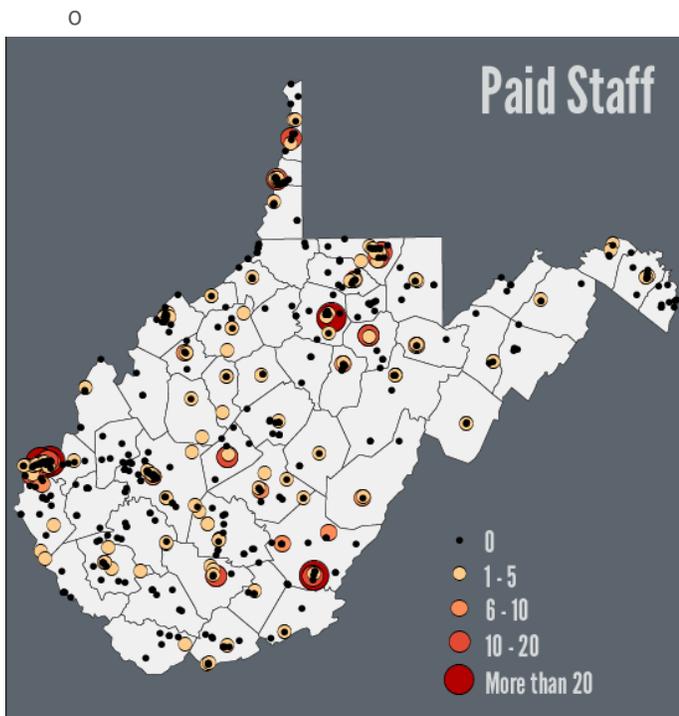
The West Virginia Farmers Market Association (WVFMA) instituted four pilot gleaning projects over the 2015 farmers market season. Brooke County Farmers Market, Charles Town Farmers Market, Pocahontas County Farmers Market and Monroe Farm Market received funding to set up a project that would provide donated farmers market produce to an emergency food system provider in their community. All farmers markets were required to include a letter of support from their emergency food system partner in their application. Each gleaning project was different. One would work with its current group of vendors to encourage them to donate leftover produce or seconds to a local food pantry. Another would drive the leftover produce to a town in a neighboring county in a food desert with a small food pantry that has very limited access to fresh produce. The other two projects would each create a "donation station" where farmers market vendors and shoppers could donate produce that would then go to a local food pantry. The goal of these projects was to initiate communication between farmers markets and emergency food system providers and to work out the logistical problems that can prevent these groups from working together to provide local produce to low-income households who receive assistance from food pantries

CHARITABLE FOOD ASSISTANCE

kitchens are often faith-based and run mostly by volunteers. They also may be open irregular hours, such as only on Friday evenings or the second Thursday of any month. Farmers market hours are also irregular and may not match those of the local emergency food provider. In addition, these two groups may not even be aware of each other or may have only limited communication. Food pantries may also lack the refrigeration needed to hold produce between the time of delivery from the farmers market and pantry dates. Despite these logistical barriers, farmers and farmers markets were open to the idea of donating leftover products if someone else would handle the logistics. Better communication between farmers, farmers markets and emergency food system providers would be a good first step.

LABOR WITHIN CHARITABLE FOOD ASSISTANCE NETWORKS

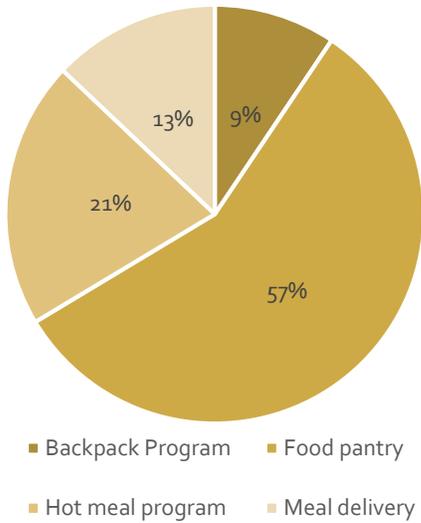
The emergency food network would collapse without the dedicated volunteers that regularly organize to unload trucks, distribute food boxes, prepare and deliver meals, sort snacks, organize fundraisers and food drives. Some organizations have the funds to pay staff to manage their operations, usually anchor agencies for whom food assistance programs are but one of the many social services they offer in the community.



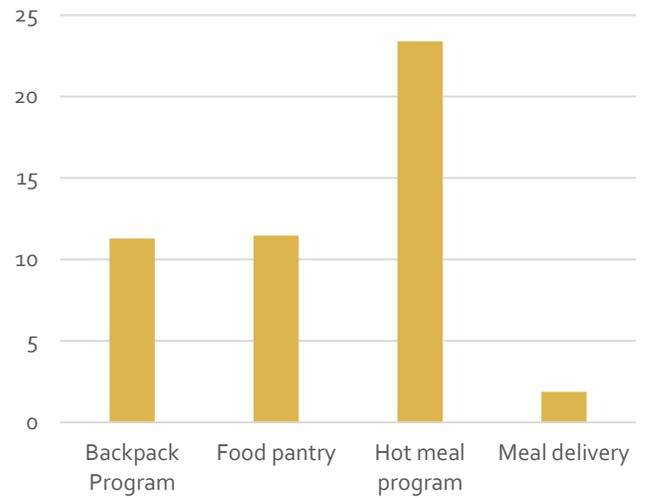
Other agencies are staffed by one part-time administrator who coordinates volunteers and fills out the paperwork and reporting necessary to continue to access regular flows of food from the Food Banks. The distinction between paid staff and volunteers is often a very fine line, since paid staff also regularly go above and beyond their job description to ensure that their particular node of the emergency food network continues to function.

CHARITABLE FOOD ASSISTANCE

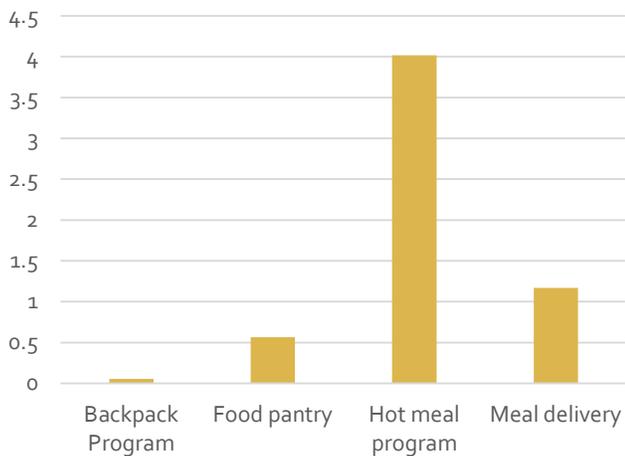
Charity Breakdown by type



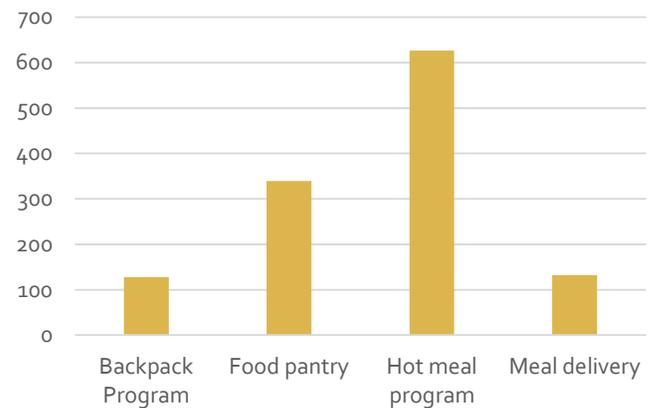
Avg # Volunteers per Site each Month



Avg # Staff per Site each Month



Number Served per Site each Month



Charitable assistance agencies in West Virginia mobilize some 7,000 hunger relief workers every month to serve hundreds of thousands of food insecure households.

ALTERNATIVE FOOD INITITIVES



Alternative Food Initiatives

ALTERNATIVE FOOD INITIATIVES

A final area of our study focuses on the proliferation of alternative food initiatives in West Virginia over the past decade. West Virginians engaged in promoting community food security are not only concerned about the effects of poverty, hunger, and health disparities, but trace the cause of these fundamental problems to systemic inequalities in the food system. In these cases, many take a critical view of the industrialization and globalization of our food system describing it as a key contributor to food insecurity, food deserts, the decline in West Virginia agriculture, and an overall loss of control over food quality, food safety, and knowing where their food comes from. Consumers, farmers and other community advocates have therefore sought to cultivate alternatives to what has become the conventional food system by reconnecting people to other food provisioning strategies that attempt to improve food access for all.

ACTOR	ALTERNATIVE FOOD INITIATIVE
Household	Gardening, Canning, Hunting, Fishing, Sharing
Emergency Food Agency	Garden, Link to Farmers, Pantry CSA, Mobile Pantry
Farmer's Market	Gleaning, SNAP, Double Bucks, Mobile Market
Community Garden	Land Access, Seed Sharing, Harvest for Hungry
Food Hub	Retail/Wholesale, Farmer Aggregation, Cooperative
Social Enterprise	Ag. Workforce Development, Farming, Marketing



Alternative food initiatives around the Mountain State are broad, innovative and varied. Their commonality lies in the fact that they are working to envision different food futures in the context of existing food system inequalities. Some like food hubs and farmer's markets seek to repair broken market channels, while others like community gardens and hunting mobilize

ALTERNATIVE FOOD INITIATIVES

consumers to produce their own food. While many of these initiatives seek to be market-oriented and self-sustaining they are also often financially supported by community foundations, public grants, and private donors. Moreover, like charitable food assistance, many of these initiatives draw heavily on volunteer labor, donated money, and copious amounts of time that derives from a commitment to a vision of transformative social change.



In our study, we have found that alternative food initiatives do not replace federal or charitable assistance for low-income families in West Virginia. Rather federal and charitable assistance will continue to play a vital role in closing the food gap for years to come. However, what we found is important about alternative food initiatives today is that they are

broadening the vision and stakeholders involved in the promotion of food access. As we highlight below alternative food initiatives help people make important links between local agricultural production, novel markets, and essential federal and charitable responses to improving food access. Their activities re-imagine who food producers are and where they can market their products, challenge charitable food assistance networks to think about the future, change public institution expectations, and educate volunteers concerned about food justice not just food access.

Federal Grant Opportunity - Community Food Projects (CFP)

In existence since 1996 these projects funded between \$10,000 and \$400,000 from one to four years are designed to fight food insecurity through the promotion of comprehensive responses to local food, farm and nutrition issues in low-income communities and build in self-reliance over food needs there.

Heavy emphasis is put on building long-term capacity and creating linkages between different parts of the food system within both the non-profit and for-profit sectors.

All CFP projects must involve low-income people directly in the work that they do, not just see them as 'customers'. Funds are intended to promote infrastructure improvement and development (e.g. mobile markets, greenhouses, food markets/hubs, gardens) and demonstrate that there are mutual benefits to both local agricultural producers and low-income consumers.

For further details: <https://nifa.usda.gov/program/community-food-projects-competitive-grant-program-cfpcgp>

ALTERNATIVE FOOD INITIATIVES

WHAT IS ALTERNATIVE FOOD?

Alternative food networks are the **response** of the **people** of West Virginia to alleviate **hunger** and **food insecurity** in a **scale** and **fashion** that the **conventional network** fails to do.

Alternative Food Programs

- Community Gardens
- For Profit/Grassroots
- Meat Processing
- School Gardens



Cucumbers free to the public at Grow Ohio Valley's urban gardens



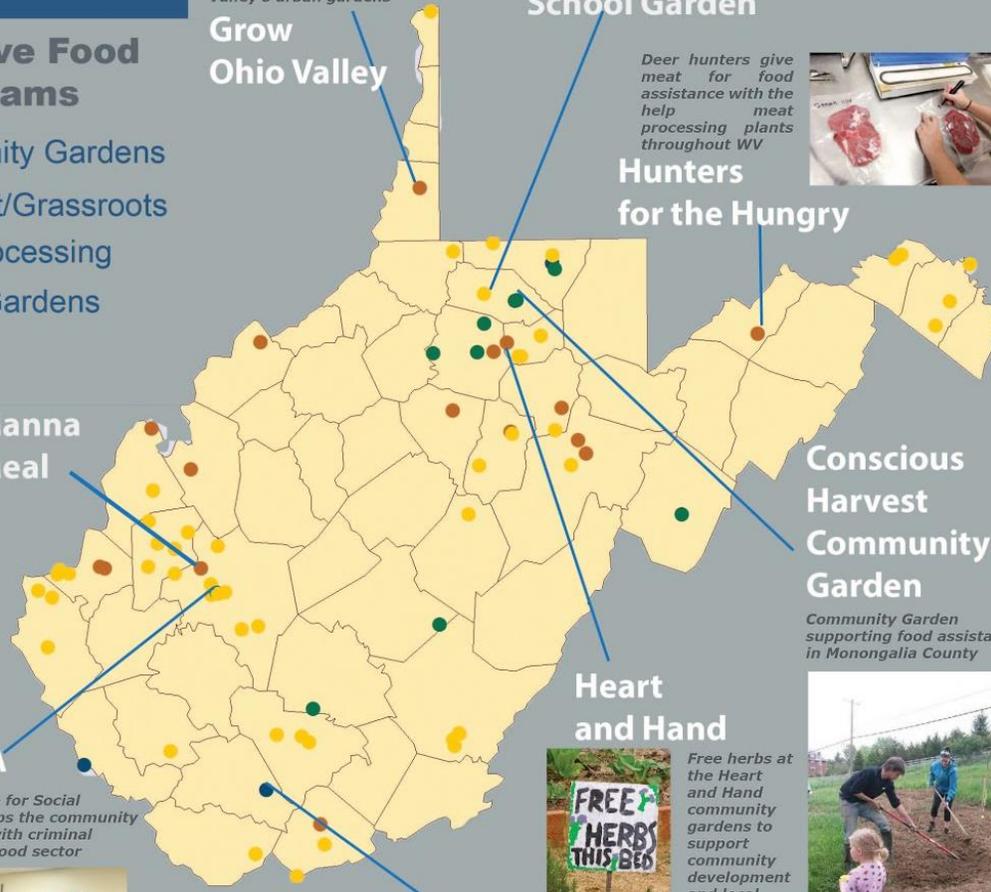
Children growing their own food at North Elementary

North Elementary School Garden

Deer hunters give meat for food assistance with the help of meat processing plants throughout WV



Hunters for the Hungry



Grassroots community gardens supporting alternative food assistance at Manna Meal

Manna Meal

Conscious Harvest Community Garden

Community Garden supporting food assistance in Monongalia County

KISRA

The Kanawha Institute for Social Research in Action helps the community by employing people with criminal backgrounds into the food sector



Heart and Hand

Free herbs at the Heart and Hand community gardens to support community development and local food assistance



RAIL

Free food to support community development in the beds of Raleigh Appalachian Improvement League



ALTERNATIVE FOOD INITIATIVES

EXAMPLES OF ALTERNATIVE FOOD INITIATIVES

Below we offer a sample of the many different alternative food initiatives currently operating around the state. While we are tempted to categorize for these entities in many cases they defy simple categories. Therefore we choose to focus on the diversity of initiatives themselves

WV Food and Farm Coalition

The Food and Farm coalition works to bring different food system stakeholders into conversation and implement actions which address food production, distribution, and access to local foods. They are currently developing a foodshed approach to strengthen regional food economies. The organization also advocates for policy reforms that would assist food businesses, in the areas of business incorporation, production, processing and marketing.

WV Farmer's Market Association

The West Virginia Farmers Market Association is a farmers market member organization which helps strengthen existing farmers markets and streamline the process for emergent and novel markets to operate in different contexts across the state.

Manna Meal

Manna meal provides over 150,000 free meals a year to the Charleston area. They also have a working garden that provisions 3,000 pounds of produce for their kitchens during the growing season. This vegetable supplement enhances menus and reduces food costs for the organization.

KISRA

The Kanawha Institute for Social Research and Action (KISRA) is an organization with a variety of social justice programs one of which provides job training and employment to formerly incarcerated youth. KISRA produces GAP certified high quality hydroponic vegetables in four greenhouses in Dunbar, WV and is currently building a vertical farm.

Hunters for the Hungry

A program of the West Virginia Department of Natural Resources, Hunters for the Hungry enlists the help of local hunters and meat processors to distribute deer meat to regional food banks. The program administration and processing fees are subsidized by the state while the labor and equipment involved in securing these proteins for low income households is provided by private hunters.

ALTERNATIVE FOOD INITIATIVES

Conscious Harvest Cooperative

A community garden that brings community groups and local volunteers together to contribute resources and time to growing food on a ¼ acre plot outside of Morgantown. The produce is donated to agency members of the Food and Hunger Committee of Monongalia County.

Farm to Families Program

Initiated by the Monongalia County Family Resource Center and the Shack Neighborhood House, this pilot project aims to connect low income families to a local farmer's goods. Ten Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) shares are delivered by Mountain Harvest Farm every two weeks to food pantry clients who receive a basket of fresh produce subsidized by grant funds, local food pantry budgets and community donors.

The Heart and Hand House

The Heart and Hand House is a charitable organization that provides emergency food assistance and other social services to residents of Barbour county. It operates a community garden market which provides an opportunity for local gardeners and bakers to earn money by selling on consignment products they produce and donating their excess on site.

Grow Ohio Valley

Based in Wheeling, WV Grow Ohio Valley is a social enterprise that works to strengthen Ohio Valley communities by reclaiming vacant lots, growing food there and increasing access to it in low income neighborhoods. It's vision is to incubate food entrepreneurs that will open opportunities for jobs in processing, packaging and distributing local foods. They also run a mobile farmers market that sells food in low-income neighborhoods and senior housing complexes.

Alderson Food Hub

Opened as a response to the disappearance of local food retailers, the Alderson Food Hub is a cooperative that seeks to coordinate producers and consumers to resolve food access gaps in the Greenbrier valley. The hub includes the Alderson Community Market, the Alderson Green Grocer, a community garden, and educational programming for adults and children.

The Wild Ramp

Based in Huntington, WV the Wild Ramp is a consignment market for member producers that provides them with the opportunity to focus on their production efforts rather than marketing. Consumers are encouraged to volunteer time staffing the market and contribute yearly membership fees to subsidize its operation.

ALTERNATIVE FOOD INITIATIVES

School Gardens

School gardens across the state are encouraging students to participate in learning activities that involve food production. These programs include reading, math, nutrition, language arts and more in their curricula and while each is structured differently, it has offered many schools the opportunity to collaborate with local organizations in their area to discuss food access issues. The West Virginia University Extension Service Master Gardeners program has provided support for school gardens, which also offer student growers the opportunity to sell their produce to the school cafeteria or take fresh produce home for family consumption.

Refresh Appalachia

Refresh Appalachia is a social enterprise of the Coalfield Development Corporation, an organization that works to improve quality of life for low income households in Southern West Virginia. The initiative centers on workforce development establishing training and business development programs to increase the success of beginning farmers and ranchers.

Mountain People's Cooperative

One of the oldest food buying clubs still in operation in the state, Mountain People's Cooperative provides a market space for local food producers across West Virginia. It is positioning itself as a regional food hub for the north central West Virginia region. It also partners with food pantries in Monongalia county to provide bulk food orders to them at cost.

SCRATCH Project

As an Extension Service program of West Virginia State University, the SCRATCH project in Huntington, WV provides learning opportunities for youth and their families through an introduction to agriculture. K-12 participants learn to grow and process foods for consumption, through the use of a Junior Master Gardener curriculum that includes both farming and business practices; participants produce products for sale.

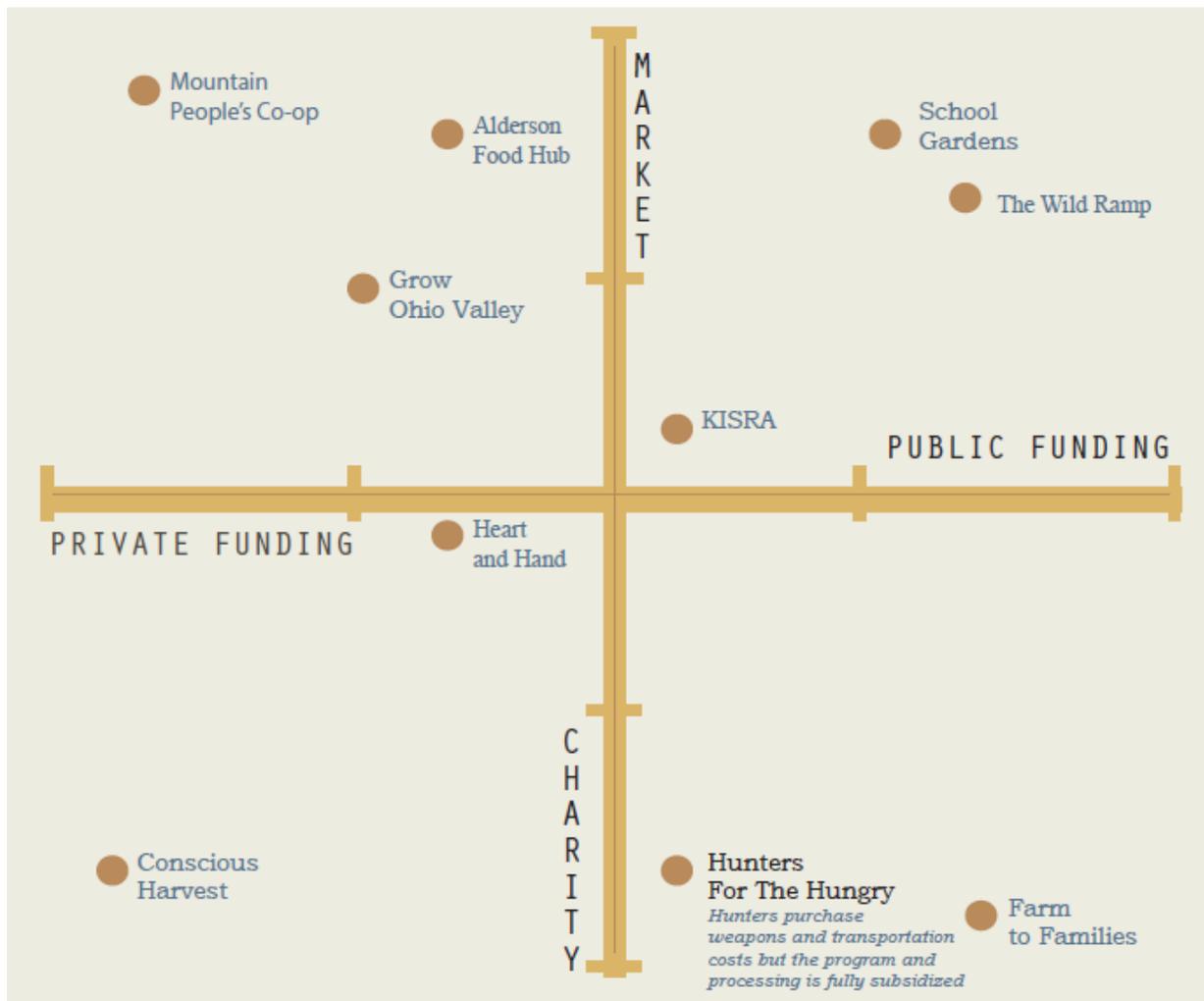
Farm to School

The WV Farm to School program is managed by the WV Department of Education and works to connect locally grown produce to school and community center K-12 meal programs. Schools receive a subsidy to plan menus with fresh foods purchased from West Virginia farmers and gardeners. The program is highly successful, and leading the way in the Mid-Atlantic region.

ALTERNATIVE FOOD INITIATIVES

HYBRIDITIES

In this diagram we attempt to capture the hybrid and multidimensional character of alternative food initiatives in West Virginia. Rather than categorizing these initiatives in terms of their practices (gardening, food hub, hunting) we have plotted them along two axes. On the vertical axis we focus on the orientation of these initiatives from more market-oriented to more charitable. The difference here lies in the expectations for the profitability of the food produced, exchanged or donated in these initiatives. In some cases, creating a viable for-profit enterprise is paramount in cases such as Mountain People's Co-op or Alderson Food Hub. However in other cases such as School Gardens and Hunters for the Hungry, the model is oriented toward creating a viable food donation program. On the horizontal axis we focus on the funding necessary to kick-start or sustain these alternative food initiatives. Often obscured in the promotion of alternative food are the numerous private and public subsidies necessary to get them off the ground or enable them to expand.



ALTERNATIVE FOOD INITIATIVES

The difference here lies in the source of funds or subsidies for the initiative from private charity to federal funds. For instance Conscious Harvest Co-operative is a community garden on donated private land that is funded by the individuals that grow and give away food to food pantries. On the other hand, The Wild Ramp is a food hub that has been supported by the city of Huntington which offers free rent in their current location and the Department of Agriculture which provides an annual subsidy of \$37,000 to support operations. Our point in conducting this analysis is to emphasize that alternative food initiatives exist on a profit and on-profit continuum and face a common problem of finding private and public subsidies to get off of the ground. By focusing attention on the hybrid nature of these initiatives community food advocates can understand the complex work of advancing alternative food and seek out new allies.

CONCLUSIONS

BUILDING NOURISHING NETWORKS

We sincerely hope this report spurs conversations across the state and region about the complexities of ensuring access to safe, culturally appropriate and nutritious foods to everyone. Our goal is to pose old and new questions and to generate a foundation for creative ideas to promote local, regional and state-wide planning around the state. In this conclusion we will not offer a list of policy suggestions or endorse a set of practices. Indeed, we are all too conscious that reports often present overly simple solutions to big problems. Food access is of course a growing problem, one whose roots run deep. But the problem has not sprung up overnight nor will it be fixed by a single magic bullet policy. Instead we must continue to work together across differences to create the kinds of policies and practices that deliver more equity and justice.

Everybody eats and therefore people everywhere should have an equal voice in determining the future of their foodscapes. All people in West Virginia should be welcome to envision and participate in the hard work of creating a healthy food future.

Food Access Coalitions, County-Scale Groups and Foodscape Planning

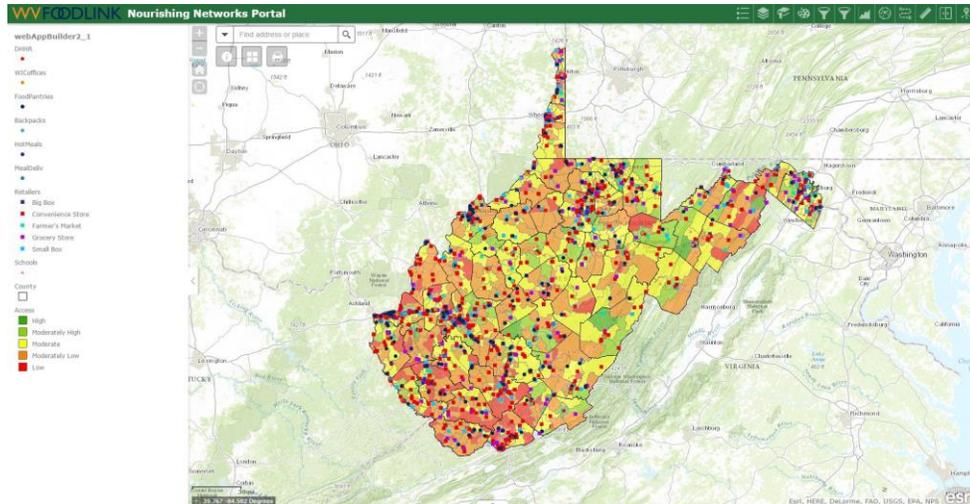
To that end the one policy development strategy and practice we do endorse is the formation of coalitions and plans to improve food access. What we need are new collaborative strategies spearheaded by diverse groups including low-income families who confront the healthy food access problem. Unlike economic development plans approved by local, county or city commissions, very few communities across the United States – let alone West Virginia - have developed comprehensive food access plans that imagine future healthy foodscapes and set achievable goals. Like all democratic planning processes, we firmly believe that these food access plans must be envisioned from the ground up and should include as many voices as possible. We need to ensure that voices which are usually silenced (the food insecure themselves) are amplified.

Democratizing control over our food systems

The quality of foods that are available to us today seems to be outside our control. Decisions about retail locations or food assistance programs are made in distant board rooms or by policy-makers who are often disconnected from local realities. Moreover, healthy food access may be shaped by other policies outside our purview that may not be immediately related to food at all. Indeed, policies related to wages, welfare, housing, healthcare and transportation are intimately tied to household food budgets. Improving access to healthy food requires a healthy democracy and citizen participation.

CONCLUSIONS

Nourishing Networks Mapping Portal for Community Food Security Advocates



Nourishing Networks Workshop



The Work Ahead

Of course, writing reports, carrying out assessments, and making plans that represent the interests of all is no easy task. Over the next few years we anticipate rich conversations and debates in communities across West Virginia. As food access disparities continue to widen in West Virginia and elsewhere however, it is imperative that those who know and understand local realities build coalitions to advocate for policies and actions that make sense, lest others continue to speak and plan for the future on our behalf. We are excited about the creative potential of coalition building and county-level group formation where we can collectively unlock the causes of food insecurity and address those realities in different places and contexts. You can count on WVFOODLINK to remain a strong partner in those excellent efforts. Onward toward a healthy food future in West Virginia.

CONCLUSIONS

WV FOODLINK

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