

**Food Matters: An Analysis of Programs  
in Saratoga County Addressing  
Access to Local Food and Low Income Communities**



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**Abstract:** Due to various social, financial, and infrastructural barriers, low-income communities rarely have access to local, healthy food options. Focusing on both urban and rural populations, this study analyzes where gaps exist between organizations that focus on these issues, why they exist, and where the connections can be strengthened.

## **Introduction**

*"The physical and emotional health of an entire generation and the economic health and security of our nation is at stake. This isn't the kind of problem that can be solved overnight, but with everyone working together, it can be solved. So, let's move."*

-Michelle Obama, Let's Move launch announcement, 2010

Michelle Obama gave this speech when she launched her Let's Move campaign to reduce childhood obesity and promote healthy lifestyles. The campaign aimed to improve health through building gardens and bringing fresh and local food to schools. Obama's initiative reflects a national trend that illuminates the many inequities of our national food system. Though mainstream culture glorifies TV Dinners and Big Macs, the public is becoming increasingly aware of the health and environmental repercussions of this lifestyle. Today, not only is food insecurity an issue of having enough food, but rather an issue of having access to the right kinds of food. While the responsibility used to be placed on the consumer to purchase healthy food items, recently research has shown that food choice is directly linked to social and structural barriers such as access and affordability.

### *Why Local Food?*

Supporting locally produced food results in a variety of benefits for the farmers, the consumer and the community as a whole. Local food supports local economies by creating jobs in the community, supporting struggling local farmers and building more holistic connections

between consumers and producers. Consumers see many health benefits from locally produced food since it is fresher and usually grown organically without the use of harmful chemicals and fertilizers. When people invest in local food, they are investing in a cleaner, healthier future. By buying local produce, consumers are cutting down on the thousands of miles that food usually travels which reduces greenhouse gas emissions from transportation, waste from packaging and energy from preserving and storing the food. Despite the many benefits of eating locally, due to a complex system of government subsidies and incentives, industrial agriculture food is significantly cheaper than local food. Therefore, local food is not available to a large portion of the population in the United States. Instead the most affordable products are highly processed foods that are high in fat and sugar that leads to health problems.

### *Food Deserts*

As a result of these national trends, food deserts are becoming increasingly common across the country. Urban food deserts are defined as areas where all residents live one mile from a large food source and rural food deserts are where residents live 10 miles from the nearest large food store. In food deserts, high sugar processed foods are the most inexpensive and available options, but they lead to obesity and a myriad of health problems. Impoverished areas are especially prone to food deserts and lack of healthy food options (Morton and Blanchard, 2007). The literature shows that rural areas, low-income communities, and people of color are most likely to live in food deserts. Most of the focus has been on urban areas, though rural regions are often more impoverished. As Sherman argues, much of the research that has been done on poverty is “conceptualized as an urban minority problem” but since the 1960’s, rural poverty rates have been higher than urban poverty rates (891, 2006). Nationwide, rural areas actually

have fewer food retailers than urban areas and 20 percent of rural counties are considered food deserts (Treuhaft and Karpyn, 2010).

Despite these findings, solutions to food deserts are mostly concentrated in urban areas with urban gardening projects becoming widely popular. The American Community Gardening Association has seen a significant rise in the building of community gardens, with thousands of them cited across the country. More than 30 percent of these gardens were started after 1991, which demonstrates the growing trend of urban community gardens in recent years (Kearney, 2009). Though these projects represent a growing interest in food issues, they are mostly concentrated in urban centers. However, the needs of the urban poor are different than the needs of the rural poor. The moral character and cultural survival strategies of the rural poor are distinct from the urban poor and need to be analyzed in their own context to create effective programs to alleviate this poverty (Sherman 2006). Saratoga County is a predominantly rural region and therefore solutions need to be developed that address the specific needs of the community. While there are many examples of successful efforts to address urban food deserts, there are fewer focused in rural areas. Therefore when examining access to local food in Saratoga County, a new model needs to be created that builds off existing solutions and utilizes culturally specific strategies.

### *Food Issues in Saratoga*

Saratoga County is perceived to be an affluent community, giving rise to the idea that there is not a need for social services to address economic insecurity and food scarcity. In reality, there is a wide range of socio-economic statuses represented, including a large number of lower income people. At the same time, Saratoga County has an abundance of small farmers that grow

fresh produce and raise livestock. As of 2007, there were eight farmers markets and 641 farms in Saratoga County; the majority of them are small farms between 10 and 50 acres (2007 Census of Agriculture). The land has a long history of farming and supplies many residents with fresh produce and meat. However, a large amount of food produced in the area is not being distributed locally, especially not to the lower income populations. Even of this small percentage, the local food is sold for significantly more money than convenience store food, preventing easy access to lower income individuals.

### *Existing Programs*

There are a number of programs that exist in Saratoga County that address either economic insecurity or access to healthy food. In this research we explore the relationship between lower income communities and access to local, healthy food options through the perspective of non-profit organizations that are addressing these issues. Through this research we will illuminate what is being done to improve local food access in lower income communities, where more connections can be made between groups and how the infrastructure can be enhanced to better connect the rural poor communities with local, healthy food sources.

### **Methods**

We began our research by examining the current state of both marginalized communities and local food on a national scale and locally in Saratoga County. We found that there is a significant amount of research about the connections between lower income people and access to healthy food, as well as the benefits of this food on quality of life. We used this research to understand the national trends regarding local food and marginalized communities. In order to

bring these issues to a local level, we started by speaking with members of Saratoga County that are currently involved in either issues regarding local food and/or lower income populations. Through our interactions with these stakeholders, we had a better understanding of the economic diversity of the county and what programs are in place to address the issues of rural poverty and food access.

After learning that Saratoga County has the highest number of mobile home communities in the state, we decided to use them as case studies of low income communities in the area. We began our process to find a gatekeeper from a mobile home, someone that was willing to help us access this community so we could learn about the relationship between lower income peoples and food. For various reasons this proved to be a difficult task so we decided to start by interviewing a manufactured houses real estate agent. Given his perspective as someone that interacts often with members of this community we hoped he would have an idea of where to start. The interview was informative, but didn't provide the insight we needed. However, in a coincidental Sustainable Saratoga meeting we met Siobhan O'Hearn who works at the Cornell Cooperative Extension (CCE) doing nutritional outreach to low-income communities in the area. She provided us with crucial information about her work and the existing programs in Saratoga County. We continued in this pattern of interviewing organizations involved in poverty issues but still had trouble finding members of lower income communities to speak with directly. While we were lacking that knowledge and potential for gaining it, we realized that we were collecting an expanse of information about the programs and organizations in Saratoga County that are working towards more accessibility of local, healthy food, and there was still a lot more to explore. Re-conceptualizing our research project, we began to focus on the connection between low income communities and access to local, healthy food through the perspective of

organizations focused on these issues. This provided both a lens for us to learn about rural and urban poor in Saratoga, as well as the current state of community action to alleviate poor nutrition in these demographics.

Interviewing organizations that are working on these issues in the area shed light on where there is a lot of effort being placed as well as, perhaps more importantly, where they can be improved. This became clearer when interviewing organizations like the Farmer's Markets, who do a lot for local food in the area but little regarding lower income communities. Using a snowball method of each organization suggesting another organization to interview, we collected data from people with varying kinds of involvement with the project. Pairing the personal interviews with statistics about poverty, food issues and nutrition nationally and locally, our next step was to analyze the relationships between the organizations. This highlighted where we believe there should be more focus in order to make local, healthy food accessible and appealing to lower income communities.

## **Results**

### *National Trends in Food Deserts*

In our research we found a growing trend in food deserts across the country, especially in rural communities. Rural food deserts are considered places where all residents live 10 miles or more from the nearest large food source (Morton and Blanchard 2007). Olsen et al. (1996) states that there are three factors that contribute to food insecurity: a limited number of supermarkets, limited availability of food items and a higher relative cost of food. The phenomenon of food deserts has been recognized across the country as contributing to obesity and other health conditions. Because residents in food deserts do not live in close proximity to a fresh food source,

they are more likely to shop at convenience stores and food suppliers that sell solely canned and processed food. These types of food are generally less healthy and lead to a variety of long term health issues. There is a substantial amount of literature that highlights the dilemma of food deserts in the United States, focusing on why they occur and how they can be remedied. Because Saratoga County is predominantly rural, we examined how these national trends were being played out in this region.

While most research focused on urban food deserts, there is also growing interest in rural food deserts and why they exist. Studies show that low income communities, communities of color and sparsely populated rural areas are the least likely to have sufficient opportunities to buy healthy, affordable food (Treuhaft and Karpyn 2010). Rural areas actually have fewer food retailers of any type compared to urban areas and 20 percent of rural counties in the US are considered food deserts. Nationwide, supermarkets are 7.4 times more available in urban versus rural areas. Rural regions bring a specific set of problems to the issue of food insecurity as opposed to urban area. Lack of transportation in rural areas becomes a huge issue and while there is usually higher vehicle ownership, those who don't own vehicles are particularly isolated (Treuhaft and Karpyn 2010). This is true in Saratoga County as well, while there are programs in place that give incentives for low income families to shop at farmers markets, they often don't have the means to get there (Kennedy 2011, DeMatteo 2011). Instead residents are forced to rely on low cost, high fat, high sugar prepared food from small food stores, convenience stores and gas stations.



### *Urban and Rural Poverty*

In addition to transportation, there are other issues that need to be considered when specifically dealing with the rural poor. Olsen et al. (1996) and Sherman (2006) argue that the rural poor are less likely to participate in food assistance programs and because they are not available or culturally acceptable and are more likely to participate in culturally specific survival strategies such as subsistence activities. Things like hunting, fishing and gardening are a highly valued alternative form of survival for members of mobile home communities.

Because urban poverty is often more visible and the public has been more widely aware of it recently, there are few non-governmental organizations that address rural poverty and food scarcity. Programs like Women Infants and Children (WIC) and Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) are available to rural and urban lower income individuals, to provide better food security. However, we wanted to examine what non-governmental programs are doing to get a deeper understanding of how the issue is being dealt with specifically in Saratoga.

### *Demographics of Saratoga County*

While there are pockets of wealth in the county there are also high numbers of people dealing with economic insecurity. According to the US Department of Agriculture, in Saratoga County, 10.83 percent of the population are low income and don't have access to a grocery store within one mile of their home. In 2007, 22.9% of the population received Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits. Eleven percent of children were eligible for free lunch programs and 15 percent of low income preschool children were obese. In another display of the wide range of socio-economic statuses, Saratoga County also has the highest

number of mobile home communities of any county in New York State, with a total of 120 according to the Economic Opportunity Council (McCarthy 2011).

In terms of availability of local food, while the region does have very productive farming land, 14.2 percent of the farms did direct sales and only 4.2 percent did direct to consumer sales (Food Environment Atlas, 2011). This means while there are many farms in the area, very little of what is produced is going directly to county residents, and what is being sold directly to residents is more expensive than convenience store alternatives. As seen in Table 1, it is significantly less expensive to purchased prepackaged and canned food than fresh items at the Farmer’s Market.

*Table 1: Price Comparisons for \$10.00 at Farmer’s Market and Convenience Store*

| Saratoga Springs Farmer’s Market | Local Convenience Store                    |
|----------------------------------|--|
| 1 Bag of Spinach (\$3)           | 5 Packets of Ramen Noodles (\$4)           |
| 4 Apples (\$3)                   | 3 Cans of Chef Boyardee (\$3)              |
| 3 Cucumbers (\$4)                | 2 Boxes of Kraft Macaroni and Cheese (\$3) |

*Overview of Existing Organizations*

There are many organizations in Saratoga Country that are fighting for and promoting critical issues such as economic equality, food security and local farming, although there is often a perception that these are unrelated causes, resulting in a disconnect between the movements. While some of the programs promote general food security in the form of non-perishable items, we believe they should take it one step further and promote local food. With the many benefits of local food and the high percentage of lower income people that resides in the county, a better connection would be mutually beneficial for both the farmers as well as the lower income people

in the area. In order to understand these connections, we interviewed representatives from three different sectors of non-profits, the first dealing with food access. These organizations are Sustainable Saratoga, Capital District Community Gardens and various departments at Cornell Cooperative Extension. The second grouping of organizations handle poverty issues, including the Franklin Community Center, CAPTAIN Youth and Family Services and Economic Opportunity Council. Finally we interviewed organizations that work with local food, both the Saratoga Farmers Market and the Ballston Spa Farmers Market.

Some of these organizations have been working together towards better food access in the county. For example, the Saratoga Springs and Ballston Spa Farmers Markets as well as the other six markets in the area are specifically focused on promoting local food and farming. The Saratoga Farmers Market has a close relationship with the Economic Opportunity Council. They often donate extra food and vouchers to the organization. The Cornell Cooperative Extension also comes to the market every week in the summer to do nutritional education and provide gardening consultation to farmers and community members. While Suzanne Voigt from the Saratoga Springs Farmer's Market believes that farmers would be receptive to expanding their programming to focus on targeting low income communities, she says that they are constantly getting requests for donations and at this point farmers are donating all that they can.

The Ballston Spa Farmers Market is similar to Saratoga in that their mission is to provide local, fresh food to the community and support local farmers. They have a close relationship with Cornell Cooperative Extension; they hold their winter market in their building as well as having CCE run nutritional education programs at the market. Ballston Spa Farmers Market vendors donate produce to the three food pantries in Ballston Spa and most vendors accept Electronic Benefit Transfer card (EBT) and WIC cards.

There are many other organizations in the area that are trying to bridge the gap between healthy food and economic equality. Cornell Cooperative Extension, for example, has numerous programs in place to address issues of food insecurity, local food promotion and rural and urban poverty. The mission of CCE is to enable people to “improve their lives and communities through partnerships that put experience and research knowledge to work... [serving] urban, suburban, town and rural areas by offering programs in five broad areas: Agriculture & Food Systems; Children, Youth, & Families; Community & Economic Vitality; Environment & Natural Resources; and Nutrition & Health” (Cornell Cooperative Extension, 2011).

Siobhan O’Hearn is the Nutrition Program Educator and does various nutritional outreach programs to community members to teach them about nutrition, how to cook fresh food and the benefits of local food. She does house visits to residents and holds workshops at low income housing complexes, senior centers and addiction and recovery centers. She also used to run a program where they would provide transportation for low income residents to go to the farmers market and use their EBT cards, however it was never very successful and residents were intimidated by the culture of the farmers market (O’Hearn 2011). She has worked with various low income housing complexes in Saratoga such as Jefferson Terrace, Vanderbilt Terrace, Allen Drive and Stonequist Apartments, though residents were not very receptive to her programs. As O’Hearn explained, people were hesitant to have her come into their homes and tell them what to eat and how to live. She also discussed that there is a lack of community at these places; very few have community centers and many people keep to themselves (O’Hearn 2011).

Susan Beebe, the Assistant Director and Agricultural Issue Leader of Cornell Cooperative Extension outlined various programs they have organized to address food inequality. They used to offer programs and workshops teaching residents how to grow vegetables easily in a “dishpan

garden” if they don’t have land, educating them on why gardens are good and how to start and maintain gardens. There was a lack of interest, so these programs were eventually discontinued. Beebe reported that there used to be four or five community gardens in the Saratoga area, but now there are only two in addition to the one that Cooperative Extension runs at the 4-H center in Milton. One of plots is run by a church in Ballston Spa that grows food to donate to the local food pantry (Beebe, 2011).

Crystal DeMatteo also works for Cornell Cooperative Extension doing nutritional outreach to low income communities with Eat Smart New York, a federally funded grant program that provides Supplemental Nutrition Access Program (SNAP) recipients with “information about healthy eating and living including physical activity” (Eat Smart NY, 2011). While local food education is not a mandate, she said that the program does try to encourage it. The program holds weekly one hour classes for six weeks to residents in their home or for groups at community centers. She teaches cooking skills, food budgeting, and healthy lifestyle choices. One of the biggest challenges to connecting low income people with local food is transportation. She stated that while the Department of Social Services provides food vouchers to be used at farmers markets, residents often don’t use them because they don’t have transportation or gas prices are too high to get there.

Casey Holzworth of Sustainable Saratoga has also been successful at addressing local food accessibility for marginalized communities in Saratoga Springs, as they work to “make the City of Saratoga Springs and the surrounding communities better places to live now and for future generations by promoting economic and environmentally sustainable practices in all aspects of the local economy” (Sustainable Saratoga, 2011). They have helped build community gardens at Stonequist Apartments, a low income housing complex, at the horse racing track for

immigrant workers and they are working on building one at Wesley senior housing. As the organization states: “community gardens have long been a dream of many Saratogains. It is the hope of Sustainable Saratoga that this garden marks the first in a new network of community gardens across the city” (Sustainable Saratoga, 2011).

The gardens have been very successful in giving community members the space to grow their own food. They got seeds, supplies and compost donated from local businesses to start the garden and partnered with other organization such as Cornell Cooperative Extension, the Backstretch Employee Service Team (BEST), and the Racetrack Chaplaincy. Casey Holzworth of Sustainable Saratoga stated that residents were usually very receptive to the idea of the garden and fresh, local food. They often were eager to learn but did not know where to start and the garden gave them an outlet for that. He found that the city is receptive to gardens on city land, however the biggest road block is usually the legal issues surrounding liability insurance (Holzworth, 2011). These gardens provide inspiration to future projects and show how bridges can be built between economic inequality and healthy, local food. While these gardens are a successful example of how gardens can build community and provide healthy food options, they are still focusing solely on urban poverty and are not addressing the crucial issues of rural poverty in Saratoga County.

Capital District Community Gardens (CDCG) is another example of a successful organization that is comprehensively addressing these issues. A grant funded program for over 35 years, their mission statement reads: “We’re dedicated to working with people to foster self-sufficiency through the rewards of gardening. We help families cut their living costs by growing food locally and improving access to fresh fruits and vegetables in underserved areas” (Capital District Community Gardens, 2011). CDCG operates 47 community gardens in Albany, Troy

and Schenectady; roughly 3,000 gardeners manage these gardens throughout the region. The gardeners come from a diverse demographics and are mostly low income, underprivileged, unemployed, are far from grocery stores and/or do not have cars. The gardens have been very successful in building community and bringing neighborhoods together. CDCG also have a Veggie Mobile that brings local produce to communities across the area including day-cares, YMCA's, community centers and other neighborhoods without grocery stores. This program has been very successful and they have a very committed customer based that comes out to buy vegetables every week.

Capital District Community Gardens also run a Squash Hunger program that takes food donations in bulk from local farmers and distributes it to food pantries. Lastly, they have created the Taste Good program that goes to elementary schools to introduce new vegetables to students and educate them on how them to use them. "The *Taste Good* series encourages children to try new fruits and vegetables through a program of fun educational activities, games, songs, and samples," working with young people to create better food habits (Capital District Community Gardens, 2011). Capital District Community Gardens has now received a grant to help start a community garden with CAPTAIN Youth and Family Center in a mobile home community in Clifton Park. Sharon DiLorenzo stated that they have had a lot of requests for community gardens in Clifton Park and in rural areas in Saratoga County. CAPTAIN has established connections and outreach programs in the community and Capital District Community Gardens will provide the resources and training to start the garden.

CAPTAIN Youth and Family Services works in Clifton Park to address "the changing needs of youth and families in Saratoga County. [Their] mission is to provide services necessary to address those needs through social, educational and prevention programs, which encourage

personal and social development in teens and families” (CAPTAIN, 2011). A branch of their organization has been operating various programs at Turf Mobile Home Park for 17 years and they have a strong connection with residents and the manager. There are 1,000 people living in Turf and most of them of low income. Based on their longstanding and successful relationship, the manager of the community is donating two house plots to use for the garden. After hearing about this project, other residents of Clifton Park are now asking for community gardens in their neighborhoods. CAPTAIN is now trying to get the town on board to start a community garden on town land. It is yet to be seen how successful the garden will be here but they already have twenty families interested in plots.

Robin Kennedy of CAPTAIN emphasized that suburban and rural poverty are overlooked in Saratoga County but that the need is definitely present. Poverty is not always as visible in these areas but it exists in pockets. She pointed out that suburban poverty is growing faster than urban and rural poverty as a general trend throughout the country. CAPTAIN also operates a food pantry and thrift shop for area residents. However, since they do not have a refrigerator, they are not able to stock fresh food and only have canned and frozen vegetables. The items that sell the best at the food pantry are prepared foods. Kennedy also pointed out the fact that one of the biggest challenges to getting people access to fresh food is transportation. Since public transportation is very poor in the area and gas prices are so high, it is very difficult for low income communities to get to supermarkets or places with fresh food (Kennedy 2011).

In our research we also spoke to Jerry Cross, a mobile home manager of Garden Homes and Peter Bushey, mobile home salesman at Serenity Homes to try and get some more information about the logistics and demographics of mobile home communities in Saratoga County. Cross said that like most other neighborhoods, there are some places where there is a



very tight sense of community and other places where neighbors keep to themselves. He said that some residents grow their own fruits and vegetables in their backyard. Cross allows residents to maintain gardens as long as they don't get too unsightly or disrupt the neighbors. However, he would not be receptive to the idea of having a community garden because there is not much public land to use for a garden and it is most economically beneficial for him to use empty house plots for houses and not gardens. Although he was very receptive to new ideas and his customers' needs, he still has economics as his primary concern.

The Franklin Community Center is another organization in Saratoga that aims to “work collaboratively with individuals and other agencies to provide services that will improve the quality of life and foster a sense of neighborhood, community and family for all people” serving 2000 people annually with their services (Franklin Community Center, 2011). They run an emergency food pantry, holiday assistance programs, youth leadership development programs and a low income housing facility. Franklin provides non perishable food to people in need and do not ask for any proof of their socio economic status. Due to their lack of refrigeration capacity they are unable to accept bulk amounts of fresh produce. However, they do accept small quantities of fresh vegetables from community members and stores. Although Jamie Williams (2011) expressed their desire for a community garden, they do not have the staff capacity to begin one now. Williams said that there has been huge increase in customers in the last few years because of the recession. So far this year 334 of their clients are from Saratoga Springs City limits and 516 are from outside of the city, indicating that there are more low income people coming from the rural areas than from urban.

The Economic Opportunity Council (EOC) works to “empower low-income individuals with the skills, training, knowledge, advocacy and opportunities to help themselves become

economically self-sufficient” in the Saratoga region (Economic Opportunity Council, 2011). One of their major initiatives is running a soup kitchen that provides a free hot meal to people every day. They have a garden that was created with the help of Cornell Cooperative Extension, and is managed by a generous community member. The vegetables grown are served to the average of 70 people that come to the soup kitchen every day. This garden has proved to be successful in its two years, and the community members that utilize the resource have been very excited about access to fresh produce (McCarthy 2011). In addition to the soup kitchen, the EOC runs a food pantry, receiving items from the regional food bank. Because they have refrigeration, they are able to accept donations of meat, dairy products and fresh vegetables from the farmers markets and local producers. McCarthy reported that a high percentage of their clientele come from mobile homes, often carpooling to pick up their monthly food bank packages. Overall, the EOC has been successful in their various food access programs, and are heavily relied upon by many of the other organizations in the county.

Each organization offers crucial services to the community and many programs are working towards a similar cause. While each of these organizations is doing important work in the community, as we will discuss there are still significant barriers in the way of improving access to local food among lower income communities. We found that when the organizations address the issue of food access systemically rather than working on each problem in isolation they are able to create effective, lasting programs that link lower income people with fresh food.

## **Discussion**

There are a number of organizations in Saratoga County that are working to improve the connectivity between lower income people and access to local, fresh food. While these programs

have experienced varying levels of success, there are still major structural barriers in the way that decrease availability of local food. Due to national trends in our food system, local farmers are forced to charge high prices for their food. This makes fresh, local food increasingly more expensive than food available at a supermarket. As a result of this discrepancy, the most affordable food is unhealthy, processed food coming from industrial agriculture farms and factories. As McCarthy (2011) stated “the way you’re going to make your budget stretch is by buying Ramen and TV Dinners.”

While we originally thought the only obstacle preventing lower income people from eating local and fresh food is cost, our research shows that there are other major factors involved in how these food choices are made. There is a lack of infrastructure, on both a logistical and cultural level, to really bridge the gap between low income communities and access to local food. Some of these factors include social, physical and financial barriers to accessing local food. These barriers are present for both individuals and organization and are structurally embedded in our society. However, there are some organizations that have been able to overcome these obstacles through a comprehensive approach to food that addresses all of these issues in conjunction with one another. We found that these programs are the ones that are able to make the most holistic and lasting change.

### *Infrastructure Barriers for Individuals*

While affordability is the underlying barrier, there are other infrastructural issues that need to be addressed to improve access. A major structural obstacle that inhibits lower income people from having access to local food is that there is little public transportation to get people to food banks, Farmer’s Markets or fresh food outlets. This is especially important in Saratoga

County since a high percentage of the population live in rural areas where transportation is necessary. High gas prices today in addition to a lack of public transportation in the area make it especially difficult for residents to travel far to get fresh, local food. As seen in Appedix 1, there are eight Farmers Markets in the county though they are all dispersed throughout the region. Residents living in more rural areas far from a major highway have difficulty getting to the markets especially when the markets are only held once or twice a week. As DeMatteo (2011) explained, a family can have \$10.00 in WIC food stamps designated for Farmer's Market produce, however the cost of gas or transportation is often the same as the voucher, making it impractical to utilize the resources. When members of lower income communities do not have a means of transportation and are not in walking distance to a grocery store with fresh produce or a farmers market they are more likely to get processed food that will last a long time so they don't have to revisit the store and spend more money on transportation. Again, canned and prepared food is more economically viable for a low-income, rural population given the physical barriers of distance in the county.

Besides the many financial and infrastructural limitations, there are also social and educational obstacles in place. Knowing the benefits of fresh produce, education concerning storage, how to eat it and why it's healthy is generally lacking in these communities. In order to address this issue, Cornell Cooperative Extension has a number of nutrition education programs that teach people about the food pyramid, the benefits of fresh food, how to prepare different kinds of vegetables and storing techniques. They give out recipes, do cooking demonstrations, and bring their own food for the people taking the class. Staffers go into at-risk places and give lessons ranging from a few hours to a few weeks to the members of that community. They also

have a presence at both the Saratoga Springs and Ballston Spa Farmer's Market, where they do demonstrations on healthy eating and hand out nutrition information to consumers.

O'Hearn (2011) and DeMatteo (2011) have gone into senior centers and rehabilitation facilities, mobile home parks and individual's homes that request the information. The program has been met with mixed success in most places, though O'Hearn (2011) has noticed a change in interest within the past few years. Where she used to frequent mobile homes often, going into a single house or a group of homes, she finds that very few people want someone coming into their space and telling them about food safety anymore. Clients aren't as welcoming to newcomers entering their homes and telling them how to live. For this reason she has switched to doing mainly organized group lessons at rehabilitation facilities and senior centers, where she finds people are more receptive and interested. The low level of interest highlights a different point that fresh food cannot always be a priority for people struggling economically. As DeMatteo (2011) explained, she can go into a home and be as excited as possible about healthy food options, avoiding heart disease and living longer, "but they don't care. They need heat, the need diapers, they need car seats" (DeMatteo, 2011). There are often more pressing concerns than local produce when families cannot afford basic necessities, and this notion was seen throughout most of our direct research.

Another educational model, run by CDCG, works with kids in schools to teach them the benefits of eating fresh food and having good eating habits from a young age. Taste Good sends a representative into a classroom on a weekly basis to do demonstrations and explore different kinds of fresh produce. The kids are excited to eat new foods, and often bring these new food choices back to their homes, asking their parents to buy things like broccoli and sugar snap peas (Capital District Community Gardens, 2011).

Saratoga County is known as being an affluent community; there is often a lack of knowledge about the lower income populations in the county. For example, Kennedy (2011) pointed out that Clifton Park doesn't offer public housing assistance because it is perceived that there is no need. This became increasingly clear after meeting with Suzanne Voigt (2011) from the Saratoga Springs Farmer's market. She was unaware that Saratoga County has the highest number of mobile home communities in New York State. There are a lot of wealthy people that come to the market and spend hundreds of dollars every week on produce and other local products (Voight, 2011). This could be intimidating atmosphere for people that have never been before, come from a different social environment and are using food stamps or a comparable program. While the market accepts WIC and EBT cards, enabling people on food stamps to purchase local produce at the market, Voigt (2011) cited that there is only one regular shopper that uses food stamps, and one or two additionally per market.

### *Infrastructural Barriers*

In addition to the many barriers that make it difficult for an individual to have easy access to local and fresh food in the area, there are a number of structural obstacles in place that prevent the organizations from being able to provide fresh food to lower income individuals. One of the major sources of fresh food in the county is the eight farmers market located throughout Saratoga. The mission of these markets, however, is to create an outlet for farmers to sell their product; their priority is not to provide fresh food at a low cost to alleviate poverty issues. Based on the national industrial agriculture system as discussed above, farmers are unable to reduce their prices to make food more accessible.

Recognizing that there is potential to better connect lower income people with this abundance of local food, the Farmer's Market Federation of New York, a statewide program that supports and monitors markets in New York, put pressure on the Saratoga Springs market to allow programs to accept more food stamps, lower the prices of goods and generally make the market more accessible to a diversity of people. However, Voigt (2011) was told by the Friends of the Market, a group of local community members that support the market, that there were not enough lower income people in the area to justify increasing the accessibility for these populations. There is clearly a lack of awareness of the existence of lower income people in the area and the significant divide between the different social classes in Saratoga County.

The organizations working with poverty issues face a different set of infrastructural limitations than those dealing with local food. Some of these organizations, Economic Opportunity Council, Franklin Community Center and CAPTAIN Youth and Family Services, run food pantries for their clients. While they can all accept non-perishable items, only those that have access to refrigeration are able to store fresh produce. The organizations frequently lack the funding and space to maintain refrigeration. As Williams (2011) of the Franklin Community Center explained, they sometimes receive donations of produce from local gardeners. These items are always taken first when available; however Franklin is unable to take bulk donations due to storage limitations (Williams, 2011). The organization operates out of an old house in Saratoga with very little space available to add a refrigerator, and even if they did there are health code restrictions and guidelines to consider. CAPTAIN Youth and Family Center has a similar issue in that they run a food pantry but only have freezer capacity. They store frozen vegetables and frozen meat for their clients, but cannot take fresh produce.

Another infrastructural barrier that comes with trying to improve access to local, healthy food is stability of funding sources for non-profit organizations. Most of the organizations that are involved in this relationship are funded by state or national grants, which are apt to run out at any point. Many of the organizations are supported by the generosity of local volunteers and donations, again providing an inconsistent flow of resources. This makes it difficult for organizations to commit to something as large scale as a community garden, even if it is something they are interested in building. Williams (2011) from Franklin Community Center expressed her desire for a garden on site to supplement their food pantry but she felt there is not enough staff capacity to maintain a garden, they simply “don’t have the manpower.”

#### *Suggestions to Create Successful Programs*

Although the various infrastructural issues put hurdle in between low income people and access to local, healthy food, there are a number of programs that are working in the county. We believe that these programs can be used as a model or expanded on to address the gap in food access. A trend we found throughout our research is that the programs that have been most successful are those that look at the issue of access to local food comprehensively. Instead of just trying to feed individuals they are able to see the larger social context and the many factors that contribute to food insecurity. As a result a sense of community is built around food creating lasting change. This in turn engages individuals in their food choices and creates a sense of personal responsibility to eat healthy. The most successful programs address the root of the problem in a comprehensive way by incorporating all of the social, infrastructural and cost barriers into the solution.



For example, the Veggie Mobile created and managed by Capital District Community Gardens is a viable option to address lack of transportation to fresh food. The Veggie Mobile is a powerful way to bridge the gap between low income communities and local, healthy food since it solves the issues of lack of transportation in addition to building a sense of community among neighbors. The truck essentially brings the farmers market to the people, creating the infrastructure for lower income populations to have access to local, fresh produce on a regular basis. The Veggie Mobile also creates an atmosphere of community, as DeLorenzo expressed, people come out to buy their produce and socialize with their neighbors. She explained that people come out to buy the food and stay for the whole hour, despite the brevity of the actual purchase. Clients have maintained long term friendships and a sense of connectivity with others that utilize the service (DeLorenzo, 2011). Food is bonding, it spurs conversation and connection, and in that way the Veggie Mobile has the power to bring communities together while bridging the gap between lower income people and healthy food.

When we visited the Veggie Mobile there was a consistent stream of people buying produce. The site we went to was a lower income senior home, where many of the residents were disabled and in wheelchairs. The Veggie Mobile is especially powerful for those with disabilities, as the food is brought directly to their homes, making it significantly easier to access food. Produce was sold at a reduced price as the organization buys it all in bulk, and since they are a non-profit they are able to sell it for exactly the price it was purchased. There were deals such as five oranges for \$1.00 and three cucumbers for \$1.00. While the food isn't all from farms in the area, 80 percent during the summer months is sourced locally but all the food is fresh and healthy.

Tolu Fashoro, the driver of the truck that day, explained that they sometimes run food demonstrations and give out samples to clients. There are recipes available inside the truck, as

well as nutritional information about the produce (Fashoro, 2011). The atmosphere was positive and welcoming, with music playing and people outside socializing. One woman we spoke with called the Veggie Mobile “a godsend” and “a blessing,” as she would otherwise have to travel longer distances to get fresh produce. The Veggie Mobile addresses the issues of education, transportation and cost comprehensively, making fresh food easily accessible and affordable to lower income populations. While the Veggie Mobile operates in urban neighborhoods in the capital region, we believe the model could easily be applied to rural areas in Saratoga County such as mobile home parks. If an organization could secure a grant to run a program, perhaps they could purchase food from the many local vendors in the area. It would be mutually beneficial to farmers, as they have more financial stability for the season, and beneficial to the people in the area that need food the most.

Community gardens are another example of a way to holistically address the issues of access to local food. Gardens have the potential to build community, increase availability of fresh food and give people a sense of ownership over their diet and health. Because community gardens are managed locally, there is no need for transportation to or from the food source, and the once the garden is built there is a low cost of maintenance. This is true on a broader level than Saratoga County, as our literature review provided the same information about how community gardens can provide a venue for connection that might not otherwise exist. Growing up in a society that emphasizes individuality and independence, it is difficult to find a neighborhood that has a true sense of community support.

According to a study at the University of Illinois, gardens have the potential to give “residents an active role in the neighborhood and a sense of control over an important aspect of their lives...residents living near common spaces with trees know one another and socialize

more with neighbors, believe they can call on neighbors for support, and feel safer than residents living in barren areas” (Englander, 2001). There is a structured space established for conversation with an atmosphere of health, learning and productivity. This also leads to further participation in community events such as block parties, potlucks and celebrations. Armstrong discusses that gardeners in lower income communities were four times as likely to address other neighborhood issues as those in middle or upper class areas (Armstrong, 2000). Providing a space for growing food subsequently provides a space for conversation, neighborly support and a general sense of community.

We found that while there is always room for improvement with the established gardens in the area, the majority of them have been successful in creating community and providing access to food. Capital District Community Gardens have facilitated and/or built 47 community gardens in Albany, Schenectady and Troy, and for the most part have found success similar to what is explained above. DeLorenzo reported that they have had communities that truly thrive off the gardens; people were involved and invested in the process and bonded as a community. There are people that come back every year, depending on their plot as a source of food, community and mental health. But these successes are also paired with gardens that have had more difficulty maintaining success. Most gardens are well maintained, though DeLorenzo explained that some of the plots are ignored, left to the weeds and appear unattractive to outsiders. However, Capital District Community Gardens has made an important impact on many low income communities and access to healthy food.

Holzworth from Sustainable Saratoga has built two community gardens in Saratoga Springs. The garden at the Racetrack, established with the help of the Backstretch workers, has also been well received, as reported by the Saratogian on August 17<sup>th</sup> 2010, “backstretch workers

stop in to tend to the plants after the races or while they're on breaks. They also helped establish the plots one May afternoon, when workers joined about seven local volunteers to begin planting” (Donges, 2011). The garden at Stonequist produces vegetables and fruit for people living in the apartments, many of whom are developmentally disabled. He recalled a mother and son gardening together, and has plans to install benches so people are able to linger and hopefully foster that sense of community in the future. Holzworth explained that there is not yet strong sense of community among members since it is only in its first season, but he believed that people felt a sense of ownership over their plots based on their protectiveness of the produce grown (Holzworth, 2011). He is hopeful for the future and has plans to expand the garden and add benches, creating a space for people to linger and socialize.

Both Capital District and Sustainable Saratoga have built gardens in exclusively urban spaces, but there is some work being done on incorporating rural populations as well. For example, the 4H center in Milton has a garden in a more rural area of the county. It was established by Cornell Cooperative Extension, and they have ten plots that are in relatively high demand. The people that maintain the garden are from the surrounding towns of Clifton Park, Galway, Greenfield and others. Gardeners come from a variety of social backgrounds and socioeconomic statuses; they are willing to drive long distances to have access to a garden, reflecting the demand for community gardens.

In a positive example of community groups' working together, CAPTAIN Youth Center has paired with Capital District Community Gardens to build a community garden at Turf Mobile Home Park in Clifton Park. CAPTAIN already has a large presence at Turf based out of Sheryl's Lodge, a community space managed by CAPTAIN. Sheryl's Lodge has been in place for 17 years to work with the residents of Turf, as it is known within the community as being one

of the more run-down and lower income mobile home communities in the area. Kennedy pointed out that out of the 1000 people that reside at Turf, 60 percent of the children are eligible for free lunches at school, exemplifying both the poverty and need for food access in the neighborhood. Through their longstanding relationship, Kennedy of CAPTAIN suggested the implementation of a community garden at Turf, where the manager was supportive of the idea. This notion has been seen consistently throughout our interviews and research; gardens are significantly more effective when the desire comes from within the community, rather than imposed by an outside organization. The installation and building of the garden will be facilitated by Capital District Community Gardens, and Kennedy feels that people were excited about gardening. This will provide supplemental food to the residents, in addition to the many impacts gardening has on building a sense of community, improving the health of residents and providing access to local food.

These gardens have proven to be powerful methods of providing fresh food, aiding in building community and improving health and quality of life. Despite the many benefits, there are some logistical issues with building community gardens. For example, mobile home manager Jerry Cross explained that he would not be receptive to a garden being built in one of his mobile home parks. Part of the reason for this is financial; if there is enough space for a garden, he would prefer to sell another plot for a manufactured home since it would be more economically beneficial for him. He was also concerned with the maintenance and aesthetics of the garden, as there is a possibility for vandalism and looking unkempt if not properly managed by residents. Cross didn't want a garden to become his problem if residents did not maintain their plots, which highlights the issue of responsibility on larger scale. Based on his experience with building gardens in Saratoga Springs, Holzworth explained that while the city of Saratoga has expressed

interest in more community gardens, there is an issue of liability within gardening. If a problem arises and someone gets hurt at the garden, it becomes the responsibility of the city to handle the situation (Holzworth, 2011). The concern of liability has been consistent through our research as a common problem when cities or organizations do not have the insurance needed to move forward with a garden.

Acknowledging some of these issues, there is still a lot of potential for garden-building in Saratoga. Community gardens have become increasingly popular in urban space because they are able to be located in already densely packed neighborhoods. This is not always possible in rural areas because of the sparse distribution of people. However, Saratoga is a unique example because it has a high percentage of mobile home communities where neighbors are concentrated in one area, making community gardens a viable option to address the issue of transportation. The community garden that is being started by CAPTAIN in Turf Mobile Home Park can offer a model for the rest of the county.

Another possibility to overcome these hurdles as discussed by Beebe (2011) is “dishpan gardening.” She explained that something they used to do was go into mobile home communities and teach residents how to build a small scale vegetable garden out of an old dish basin. They did lessons with the children in the communities on “pizza gardens” in which they could grow things to put on a pizza: tomatoes, peppers, herbs and greens. This method gets children interested in vegetable production at a young age, and is affordable and easy for people living in low income areas. Cornell Cooperative Extension used to run these programs frequently but has stopped in the past few years due to lack of demand. Backyard gardens are another way to get people to grow their own food and take responsibility for their health. This is a viable solution when there is not necessarily the space or resources to create a community garden. Smaller scale

projects like this add to the portfolio of possible solutions available to improve the connection between low income populations and access to local, healthy food options.

It is crucial to address the education barrier in conjunction with the infrastructural and cost issues. A successful example of this is the Taste Good program run by CDCG. They start teaching children at a young age about the importance of eating healthy which influences their families and creates lifelong values. “Parents can’t believe it when their children come home and tell them that they tried broccoli and want them to buy it” (Capital District Community Gardens, 2011). These programs are effective because they get to the root of the problem by attempting to change social norms and priorities of these communities from a young age.

## **Conclusion**

Through personal interviews and previous studies we explored what is currently being worked on in Saratoga County regarding low income populations and access to healthy food options. What we found was that regardless of desire to improve connections to local food, there are systematic hurdles preventing organizations from really changing food access. Mainly economically driven, these barriers range from lack of transportation to an unawareness of the importance of eating healthily. Understanding where the inhibitors are will hopefully enable these organizations to improve the current situation, in which lower income populations rely on processed and unhealthy food to sustain themselves.

We recognize that most of these barriers come down to a lack of financial resources, on both the lower income individual and organizational level. If there is more collaboration between organizations, they can pool their resources and create more systematic change. Each organization excels in certain areas, whether by providing access to either local food or

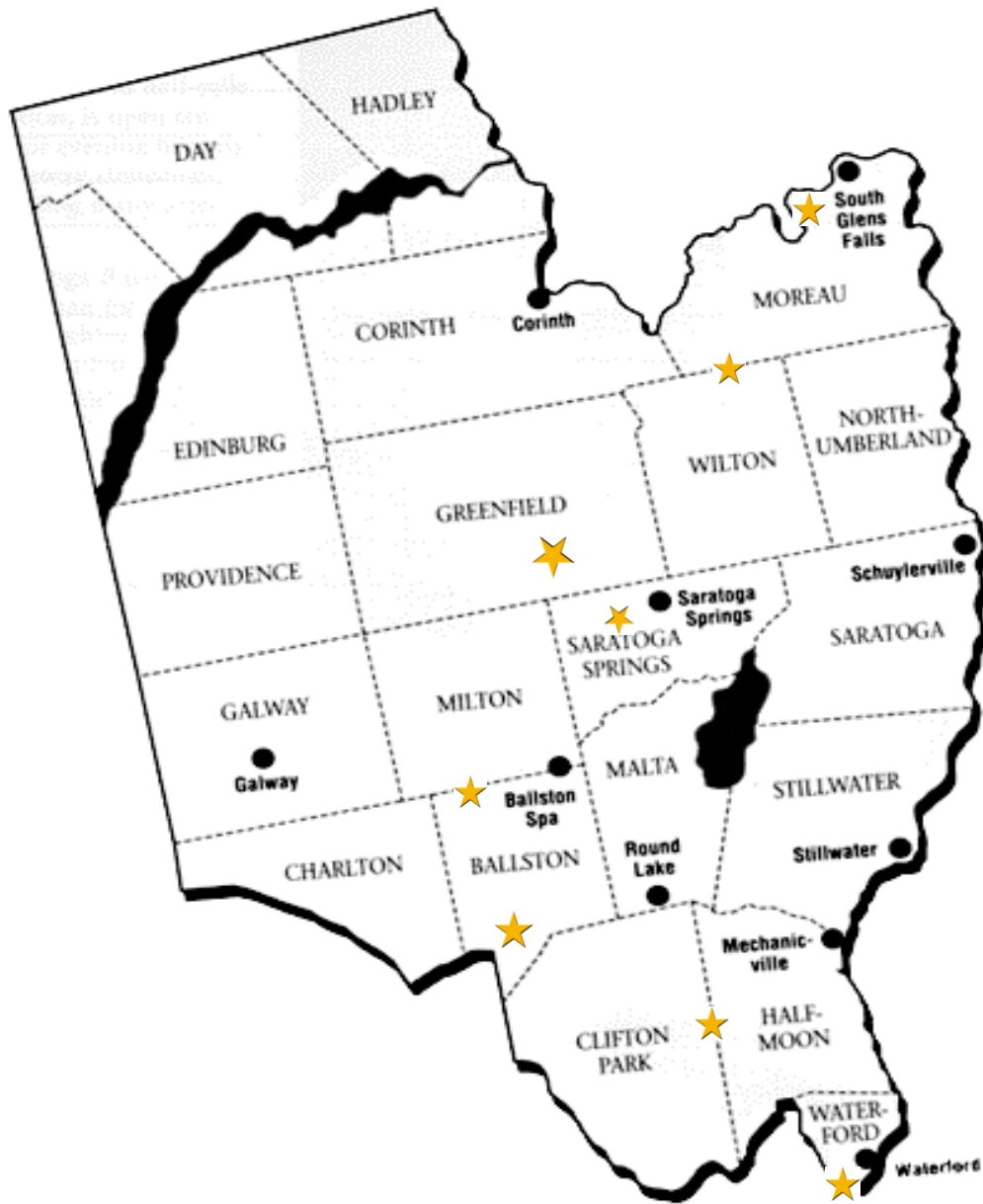
alleviating poverty. Increased connection among groups could help to handle the problem of food access holistically, creating more longstanding and successful change.

The most successfully implemented programs all focus on creating a sense of community around food. Whether this is through building and maintaining a community garden or lingering around the Veggie Truck with neighbors, this atmosphere not only makes healthy food accessible, but promotes a healthy lifestyle. The successful programs emphasize food independence and ownership over ones' diet, signifying the national trend that eating is more than just alleviating hunger. Food has the potential to generate social connections, support local economies, improve healthy lifestyles and create a deeper connection to the land. Ultimately, food has the power to significantly improve quality of life, often in communities that need it most.

Given the national trends in food deserts, these problems are relevant to organizations across the country. While each region has a different culture with a unique set of issues, there are many similarities that can be seen throughout. Issues of transportation, limited resources, and lack of nutritional education are all concerns for low income people throughout the country. Therefore, Saratoga County can be viewed as a microcosm of larger trends on a national scale. This research could be applied to a variety of contexts with cultural differences being taken into consideration. Regardless of the region, an emphasis on addressing systematic barriers and building community around food is crucial to making any project successful and sustainable.



*Appendix 1: Map of Farmers Markets in Saratoga County*



★ Farmers Markets

*Appendix 2: Pictures of projects in Saratoga County*



*Residents building community garden at Stonequist Apartments, Saratoga Springs, NY*







*Franklin Community Center food pantry full of canned and prepared foods*



*Saratoga Springs Farmers Market*

*Backstretch racetrack worker tending to his plot at the garden*







*Veggie Mobile selling local produce to residents in the capital district*



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