

Top Ten Barriers to Local Food Access for Low-Income Individuals

Local Foods Connection is a non-profit organization that purchases produce, meat and other products from small family farmers and donates this food to low-income families. As part of our main program, we enroll families in Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) groups, through which they receive a box of fresh, organic produce every week for approximately 20 weeks. Running concurrently with the CSA program, we offer our clients opportunities to learn about nutrition and healthy meal preparation. They earn points for each educational activity completed and can use these points to purchase kitchen equipment. We have begun our tenth year of work in the Iowa City, Iowa region. We also serve Fairfield, Des Moines and Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

The list was compiled by Local Foods Connection staff and volunteers, as well as social service agency personnel who serve the same populations we do. LFC serves single mothers, people with exceptional medical needs, immigrants, refugees, the elderly and racial minorities in cities ranging in size from 9,000 to 200,000 people. We realize that people living in bigger cities or smaller towns, in Iowa or elsewhere in the country, might experience additional obstacles unique to their environment and consequently might not be well-represented on this list. Furthermore, we understand that some of the challenges on this list are confronted not only by low-income families, but by people of all income levels wishing to purchase more local foods and to add fresh food to their diet.

1. Financial Restrictions

We believe that cost is the greatest obstacle low-income individuals face in accessing fresh, and especially organic and locally-produced, food.

- The cost of vegetables and fruit rose 120% between 1985 and 2000, while the price of junk like sodas and sweets went up less than 50% on average (source 3)
- Fresh food often doesn't provide as many calories per dollar as processed food.
- Fresh food doesn't stay fresh as long as processed food.
- Fresh food requires more labor to make into appealing, satisfying meals than processed food.
- Eating a variety of colorful fresh fruits and vegetables, as recommended by the USDA, is expensive. Even though some fruits and vegetables can be bought at Farmer's Markets for a good price, purchasing products of different nutritional contents on a regular basis throughout the year is costly.
- Eating out-of-season fresh fruits and vegetables is even more expensive.

We believe that healthy food is often one of the first things cut from a family's budget when they are experiencing financial difficulties. Faced with limited resources,

- One out of six Americans turns to government food assistance programs.
- People skip meals.
- People substitute less expensive, less nutritious alternatives.
- People go to soup kitchens or food pantries.
- Parents skip meals to make sure there is enough food for their children. For parents, it is more important to ensure that their children have enough food and "are full" than it is to provide children with a healthy diet.
- People cannot afford a balanced meal.
- People choose to pay bills (e.g. rent, utilities, and prescription drugs) instead of buying food.(source 2)

We believe that individuals depending upon supplemental food assistance from the government can be restricted in the types of food they are allowed to purchase.

- The government places restrictions on where food assistance coupons can be used. For example, WIC coupons cannot be used at the New Pioneer Co-op, the natural food stores in the Iowa City/Coralville area.
- Organic foods are not always eligible for purchase with WIC coupons. Individual states make the decision (source 9).

2. Preparation and Storage of Food- Individuals

We believe that low-income families lack, and cannot afford, much of the equipment and companion ingredients needed to prepare fresh food into a variety of interesting, fulfilling meals throughout the year.

Individuals might lack such basic ingredients as: cooking oil, garlic/onion, butter, milk, flour, spices, etc... Purchasing basic kitchen equipment can be an obstacle as well, such as blenders and adequate pots/pans for recipes that aren't "one-pot" meals. Major appliances might be absent from their lives or might be inadequate for storage and food preparation. Lots of low-income folks live doubled up (with friends or family members) or in rooming houses where they may be lucky to have one shelf in the fridge for cold storage. Appliances can be unreliable - a cooktop with one working burner, for instance.

3. Distribution of Food

We believe that individuals and families have trouble knowing where to buy fresh local food, in addition to having difficulties getting to these locations. The challenges individuals face can be specific to the area in which they live, be it an urban, suburban or rural environment. Low income individuals might live in areas with restricted access to affordable, healthy/fresh foods.

- Cars
 - One-stop grocery shopping is easier for low-income individuals because it saves time and gas money.
 - Going to the farmer's market or a grocery store featuring local foods would require making an additional trip.
- Public transportation
 - It is not always adequate or easy to use.
 - Carrying groceries on a bus or subway is difficult, especially with children.
 - It is often inadequate in rural areas.
- Big cities often have food deserts, where only convenience stores are available for food shopping in low-income areas.
- Food delivery services can be expensive, if available at all.

4. Lack of Knowledge and Education – Low-Income Individuals

We believe that low-income individuals might lack knowledge on how to prepare fresh food for a variety of reasons, including lack of quality education, inexperience of family members, and popular cultural influences. Individuals often lack:

- An understanding of the meanings and benefits of fresh, organic, and local food.
- Awareness of the health benefits of eating fresh food.
- Confidence in preparing fresh food.
- Skills in preparing fresh food in fast, easy ways.
- Knowledge of ways to make produce attractive to children.

5. Cultural Values and Lifestyles

We believe that low-income individuals might lack experience eating meals highlighting fresh food.

- Eating habits developed during childhood, memories from holidays and other celebratory occasions, and positive, community-centered experiences might have centered on comfort foods made with lard, fat, sugar, as well as processed foods.
- An individual's life might be lacking in pleasurable and affirmative food-related experiences. Children attending crowded public schools, for example, are forced to eat lunch hurriedly, in shifts as short as 20 minutes, so that maximum use can be made of cafeteria space.
- Individuals living in urban and suburban settings might be completely disconnected from the agricultural origins of the food they eat. Never having seen a vegetable, a grain, or a fruit growing on a plant, they might be unaware of the simple form food has in its original state, and the changes it undergoes during processing.
- We believe that low-income families are accustomed to eating fast food because a great deal of fast food advertising targets low-income families and these restaurants are clustered in low-income communities.
- Families seeking emergency food assistance often receive boxed, canned, and processed food, which has a longer shelf life and can be more easily transported than fresh food. Families who depend on food pantries to survive long-term financial crises can become accustomed to convenience foods.

6. Disabilities

We believe that individuals with disabilities who take care of themselves, and those who depend upon others to care for them, face even more obstacles to local food access than those faced by the low-income population in general. There is a very high correlation between having a disability and have a low-income.

- To remain eligible to receive services through Medicaid, individuals are forced to remain at a very low-income level (source 5), hindering their ability to purchase fresh food.
- Undiagnosed individuals with mental retardation usually don't know how to use the store or even the oven. They often rely on microwave and take-out.
- Diagnosed individuals with mental retardation might receive funding for services and have access to Support Community Living (SCL). SCL is a one-on-one service that teaches, assists and creates skills for individuals with disabilities. The goal of SCL is to work toward specific goals and increase client's independent living skills and community development. SCL clients can have goals that help them learn about nutrition and how to cook and shop wisely. However,
 - SCL workers might not be educated in the areas of fresh food, nutrition and cooking.
 - Recipes need to be easy and only a few steps long.
- Similar challenges are faced by individuals with physical and mental illness and brain injury. These individuals might be eligible for Consumer Directed Attendant Care (CDAC). CDAC workers can grocery shop and prepare meals for clients.
 - However, CDAC workers might not be educated in nutrition and cooking.

7. Preparation and Storage of Food – Social Service Agencies

We believe that the variety of social service agencies which are in a position to assist their low-income client increase their consumption of local and fresh foods often lack the time, funding, experience and education to do so. Examples of the types of agencies and organizations that we believe could help their clients learn more about local and fresh food include: food pantries, neighborhood centers, Lion's Clubs, churches, homeless and domestic violence shelters, medical clinics, family resource centers, and environmental action groups.

- Few staff members at social service agencies have the extra time to add the component of local foods to their work.
- These agencies might not have adequate space, kitchen equipment and utensils with which to prepare fresh food.
- These agencies might lack the major appliance for the storage, refrigeration and freezing of fresh food.
- These agencies might lack the extra volunteers to process and store fresh ingredients safely.

8. Fulfillment of Government Nutrition Standards – Agencies & Institutions

We believe that state and federal restrictions on food purchasing can negatively affect the decision to acquire local foods by agencies and institutions that serve food to their clients, such as senior centers and school districts. If government money is used to purchase foods at an institution, it might be required to meet government nutrition standards. Reconfiguring a menu to incorporate local foods and continue to meet these standards can be a burden.

9. Lack of Knowledge and Education – Social Service Agencies

We believe that the knowledge and understanding of local and fresh foods can be limited at all levels with a social service agency's workforce.

- Workers at these agencies might lack the same knowledge of nutrition and lack fresh food preparation skills as the clients do.
- Agency administration might not have considered the potential positive relationship between improving their clients' health through their diet, and improving other aspects of their clients' lives. In order for agency staff to integrate nutrition and food into their interactions with clients, there must be interest in and commitment from the agencies' supervisors or board of directors.

10. Lack of Knowledge and Education - General Population

We believe that if the general public understood the obstacles to local food that low-income families face they would support programs and organizations that increase this population's access to good, fresh food. We believe that the general public lacks knowledge of:

- The extent of poverty in Iowa.
- The causes of poverty.
- How poverty affects food shopping habits.

FEEDBACK

Local Foods Connection is excited about starting a conversation about this list! Please join the discussion at Sustainable Table's forum and share your experiences with everyone!

- Would you change the order of any item on the list (1 = greatest obstacle; 10 = least obstacle)?
- Would you add any item to this list?
- Can you share an experience you have had with any of these obstacles?
- Do you disagree with anything we have said?
- What solutions do you have to offer?

Local Foods Connection
www.localfoodsconnection.org
localfoodsconnection@yahoo.com

With special thanks to:

Tiffany Boyle, the Lead Family Services Coordinator for the ARC of Southeast Iowa which assists developmentally disabled individuals in our community to realize their full potential in how they live, learn, work and play.

Katherine Nydam Olivier, a social worker who works primarily with people who are homeless in Iowa City.

This document was prepared as a community service by volunteers. The initiative for the creation of this document came from the Iowa Valley Resource Conservation and Development Office's I Food Initiative, a project to help strengthen the local food network in Southeast Iowa.

Our first version of the "Top Ten" list was presented at a workshop at the Iowa Network for Community Agriculture.

Bibliography

1. *2007 Hunger in Iowa Report* by Susan Roberts and Erin Feld (and the 2003 report)
2. *The Hartford Food System: A Guide to Developing Community Food Programs, Replication Manual*
put out by World Hunger Year
3. *Don't Eat This Book: Fast Food and the Supersizing of America* by Morgan Spurlock
4. *Iowans Fit for Life, Active and Eating Smart: Nutrition and Physical Activity.*
by the Iowa Department of Public Health
http://www.state.ia.us/iowansfitforlife/docs/lowans_Fit_for_Life_overview_powerpoint.ppt#256,1, Nutrition
and Physical Activity
5. Eligibility requirements for individuals with disabilities:
www.socialsecurity.gov and <http://www.cms.hhs.gov/home/medicaid.asp>
6. The ARC of East Central Iowa:
www.arcei.org
7. Living Well Iowa (run in this area by Keith Ruff through the Evert Conner Center):
www.livingwelliowa.org
8. *Retail and Consumer Aspects of the Organic Milk Market*
by Carolyn Dimitri and Kathryn M. Venezia for the US Dept. of Agriculture, May 2007
<http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/LDP/2007/05May/LDPM15501/ldpm15501.pdf>
9. Frequently asked questions of the WIC program:
<http://www.fns.usda.gov/wic/benefitsandservices/foodpkggenfaqs.HTM>
10. *Are Lower Income Households Willing and Able to Budget for Fruits and Vegetables?*
by Hayden Stewart and Noel Blisard for the USDA: Economic Research Service, Jan 2008
11. *Dynamics of Poverty and Food Sufficiency*
by David Ribar and Karen Hamrick for the USDA: Economic Research Service, Sept 2003
12. *Household Food Security in the United States, 2006*
by Mark Nord, Margaret Andrews and Steven Carlson for the USDA: Economic Research Service
November 2007