

Session G: FAIR FOOD

Goals: Residents will become food secure, will have economic access to fresh, healthy, and local foods; and food-related health incomes will be improved.

We will establish a model for food justice that will articulate an actionable food policy for Vermont and our nation.

Potential strategies:

- Develop a comprehensive gleaning program in the NEK that includes the integration and coordination of new and existing community based efforts, agricultural gleaning, retail and food service recapture, and aggregation/distribution facilities.
- Expand EBT machine usage for SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) recipients and Farm to Family Coupons to every farmers' market in the NEK. The region could also consider an incentive program for using these payments, such as an additional percentage off.
- Support a diverse region-wide NEK Food Security Task Force to address hunger and food insecurity, particularly as it relates to the regional food system. Duties could include: communicating food security needs to broader audiences and developing projects and programs to improve food access, affordability, availability, and utilization of fresh, healthy, and local foods.
- Support education efforts to promote healthy lifestyles, such as the Healthy Food Access group in Newport. Education efforts should involve cooking and preparation of local foods.
- Promote and expand community gardens in the region. Ensure they have adequate infrastructure to extend productivity and growing season (e.g. hoop houses, water filtration systems).
- Work to implement best practices geared to integrate food access in affordable housing communities. These practices include on-site gardens (individual-plot and communal), peer-to-peer education, and CSAs. Such measures will require significant coordination and will need to be designed with the needs of the specific population in mind (e.g. raised, accessible beds for senior and disabled residents, flexible CSA payment strategies).
- Utilize the Vermont Food Venture Center to distribute local produce through the charitable food system, such as the Vermont Food Bank. Explore ways to keep such a partnership financially feasible, such as the use of value-added processing fees, creative labeling, or the development and sale of the private-labelled product.
- Showcase and support social equity efforts, including gleaning programs, foodbanks, community dinners, and senior meal sites.
- Encourage municipal plans to account for food access, community health, and farmworker housing. Identify model plan and guidance documents that can empower communities to plan more effectively.
- Identify public spaces that can be dedicated to growing food.
- As communities strive to become more flood resilient, support efforts to use floodplains and riparian buffers for agricultural uses that are also ecologically functional (e.g. blueberry bush plantings in and around vegetation buffers).
- Support and showcase businesses that maintain transparency around farming, processing (including slaughter), and distribution practices.

This session is designed for you to dive deep into facilitated discussion, assess the changes in the region, and answer the following questions.

- **Can we commit to these goals and strategies? Are there other goals or strategies that we should include?**
- **What actions can WE commit to today in support of these goals and strategies? And...who is WE?**
- **How will we know when we are successful?**

To aid the creative thinking process, you'll find highlights of achievements and significant developments since 2011.



What's happened to food access and food justice since 2011...

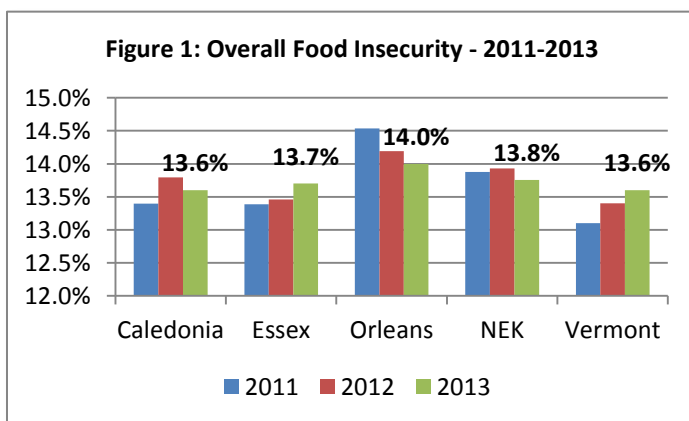
In 2014 Vermont Foodbank was able to get hunger data, shedding light on the health struggles of the food insecure. Among participants visiting Vermont Foodbank partners in Caledonia County:

- 54.7% have members in the household with high blood pressure.
- 18.8% have diabetes
- 3% report they are in poor health
- 39.4% have unpaid medical bills
- 51.5% are currently receiving SNAP benefits.

Participants reported using the following coping strategies to feed their families:

- 49.7% ate food past the expiration date
- 48.1% grew food in garden
- 33.7% watered down food or drinks
- 57.7% purchased inexpensive, unhealthy food

Orleans, Essex, and Caledonia Counties remain the three most food insecure counties in the state respectively. According to Hunger Free Vermont, the childhood food insecurity rate statewide is about one in every five. Caledonia is slightly higher than the statewide rate; Essex and Orleans are among the highest rates in the state – about one in every three. Hunger Free Vermont reports that about 11% of Vermont seniors face the threat of hunger. The Northeast Kingdom Council on Aging reports high demand for the Meals on Wheels program, including requests for assistance from “young seniors” (age 50-55), who may be ineligible because of programming restrictions of their funding sources.



Source: Feeding America, Map the Meal Gap,
<http://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/our-research>

Fresh produce is often the most expensive part of a grocery budget, but getting it to food shelves is a challenge. Some food shelves may be constrained by limited refrigeration or freezer space, but cost is also a major obstacle. A survey of Vermont Foodbank partners in late 2014 found that less than one-third had a monthly

Local Food and Fresh Food Access Resources

Green Mountain Farm-to-School (GMFTS): Partners with 25 schools and offers programming, such as school gardens, field trips to farms, taste tests, plantings, and afterschool events.

Green Mountain Farm Direct: Connects more than 40 local producers and growers with more than 100 commercial and institutional customers, including the senior meal sites, Head Start, afterschool programs, and others.

GMFTS's **Lunchbox Food Truck:** Free lunches to more than 1,300 children during the summer. The Lunchbox is able to source more than 60% of its ingredients locally. Adults may purchase meals as well, which helps to defray the cost of operations.

GMFTS Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Coupon Program: Pilot program allows Essex and Orleans SNAP recipients to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables from five NEK grocers.

Cornucopia: Operates a commercial kitchen and dining room that provides fresh, locally sourced foods in weekly community and senior meals, as well as packed lunches for delivery to seniors. The program also assists women in transition, who may participate in on-the-job training for the hospitality industry with a focus on the culinary arts.

Vermont Fresh: is a pilot program of the Vermont Foodbank that started in 2014. Operates in the Hardwick Area Food Pantry and NEKCA's food pantry in Newport.

The **Vermont Farm to Family Program** Coupon recipients may purchase fresh, locally grown fruits, vegetables, and cut herbs. The Newport Farmers' Market had the 4th highest redemption rate in 2014.

The Upper Kingdom Food Access is a consortium of partners and initiatives that works to foster better eating through education about choices in the food system. Ongoing efforts include expanding cooperation with Vermont Foodbank (including the Vermont Fresh Program), and furthering education on nutrition.

St. J ALFA: In addition to the Community Farm, has developed an online resource guide. Hosts tastings, workshops, and an Annual Food Forum.

budget that allowed them to purchase additional produce. The remainder either had no produce or would have to give up something else to access fresh produce. Despite these challenges, a number of organizations are working to get fresh, fresh prepared, and locally-sourced food to less food secure populations.

The availability of minimally processed foods could fill the need for healthy, local produce in the charitable food system. Minimal processing, the industrial preparation and packaging of food for consumption at a later date, diminishes the barriers to cooking and serving fresh produce by making produce easy to prepare and serve. While processing ventures in the charitable food system are rare, the Vermont Food Venture Center and the Vermont Foodbank may overcome the cost barriers through a partnership that maximizes the use of free or donated materials (like gleaned product), a minimal “value-added” processing fee, creative labor partnerships, or the development and sale of private-labelled product. This partnership merits further exploration.

Selected Benchmarks from 2011

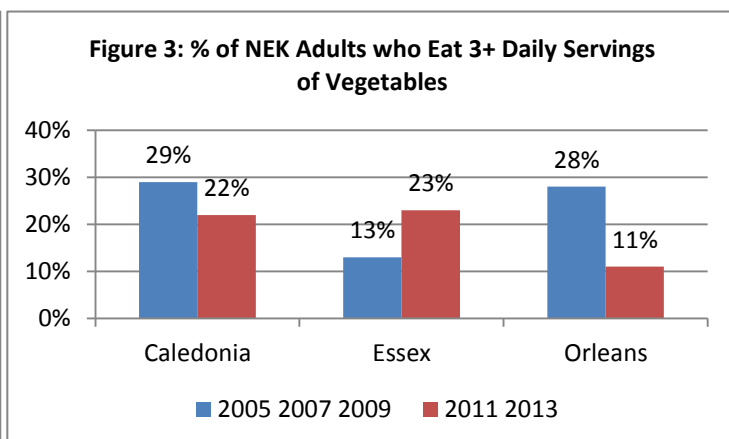
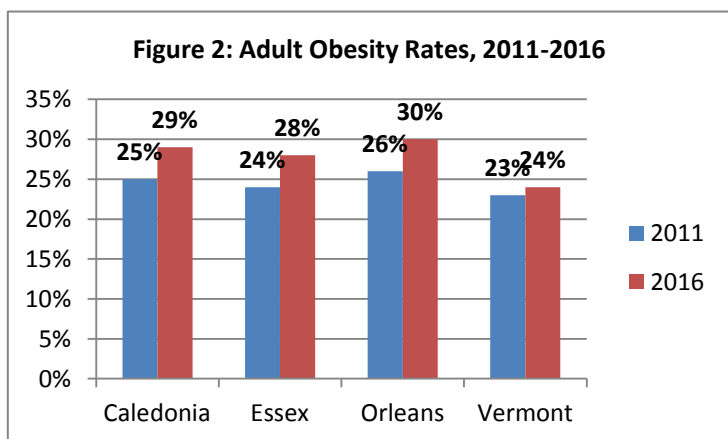
The 2011 NEK Food System Plan established a baseline of equipping all farmers’ markets in the region with EBT machines by 2013. To date, seven out of twelve farmers markets in the NEK accept EBT. (Table 2)

Table 1: Farmers’ Markets in the NEK and EBT Card Use

Farmers Market	EBT Accepted	Winter Market?	Vt. Farmers Market Assn.
Burke	NO	No	Yes
Caledonia Farmers Market-St. Johnsbury	YES	YES	Yes
Caledonia Farmers Market-Danville	NO	No	Yes
Groton Growers Market	YES	YES	Yes
Hardwick	YES	YES	Yes
Lyndon	YES	YES	Yes
Peacham	YES	YES	Yes
Lunenburg	YES	No	No
Craftsbury Common	NO	Yes	No
Greensboro	NO	No	No
Jay	NO	No	No
Newport	YES	No	Yes

Source: NOFA Vermont

The 2011 NEK Food System Plan included two target baselines for improving health: Reduce the obesity rate by 1% in each county by 2015; and achieve a 3% increase in the number of teens and adults reporting to eat three or more servings of fruits and vegetables by 2017. Latest findings from the Robert W. Wood Foundation (County Health Rankings 2016) show an increase in adult obesity rates and a greater disparity from statewide rates. (Figure 2). According to the Vermont Department of Health, vegetable consumption among Caledonia and Essex adults is considered to roughly the same as statewide, Orleans



worse. (Figure 3).

Gleaning is the act of harvesting excess or unmarketable produce from a farm. **The 2011 Food System Plan established the following baseline target: By 2016, the amount of gleaned food in the NEK will increase by 30%, and 80% of this food will be distributed to organizations/households within the NEK region.**

The Vermont Foodbank runs a statewide gleaning program that uses volunteers to glean produce at Vermont farms. Food is then distributed through the Foodbank's network. While there are several thousand pounds of produce gleaned each year from NEK farms, much of this produce is not distributed in the NEK. The region needs a comprehensive gleaning program, either through the expansion of the Vermont Foodbank gleaning program, the development of a new region-wide wide gleaning program, or the integration and coordination of new and existing community-based efforts. Fresh Start Community Farm has indicated an interest in establish a dedicated gleaning operation, modelled after the Willing Hands program in the Upper Valley.

Food recovery includes gleaning, but it also extends to recapturing food from non-farms, including perishable and prepared foods rescued from wholesale and retail food outlets, restaurants, and hotels, as well as non-perishables collected from manufacturers, wholesalers and distributors. Act 148, Vermont's universal recycling law, requires institutions that generate large amounts of food waste to divert that food out of the landfill. Vermont Foodbank reports that food recovery (of produce and shelf-stable product) is up by 30%.¹ The region currently lacks infrastructure to receive and process rescued food.

The 2011 NEK Food System Plan established a baseline of increasing the number of community gardens.

In 2011 **Fresh Start Community Farm** was established in Newport City. The gardens are established on scattered sites throughout Newport (and two sites in Derby), covering a total of 2.9 acres. Fresh Start is not an allocation garden; rather participants can receive vegetables in return for sweat equity. The sites produce over 15,000 pounds of food annually. Fresh Start also operates an extensive community outreach program that includes the Vermont Department of Health, schools, and the justice system.

The Hardwick Community Garden, an allocation-style garden, was moved to Atkins Field in 2012. The Center for an Agricultural Economy has expanded the number of raised beds to 40 and added a hoop house. Many beds are used by the Hardwick Area Food Pantry. There is a waiting list for garden beds.

Northeastern Vermont Regional Hospital has the region's oldest community garden, which was started in the late 1970s. The allotment-style garden now has expanded to 35 plots, some of which are multi-family. A compost bin and portable cistern were added in 2014. Fresh produce availability continues through the "off-season," as NVRH has partnered with the Vermont Foodbank to establish a produce drop-off at the hospital on the 3rd Thursday of every month.

St. Johnsbury Area Local Food Alliance (ALFA) has been managing the three-acre St. J Community Farm on Old Center Road for three years. Cultivated as one large space rather than by allotment, community members are encouraged to donate work time at the garden in exchange for fresh vegetables.

A community garden was established in Island Pond in 2015 on Route 105. Despite contributions of tilling, seeds, and plants, a wet season and drainage problem reduced garden output for this site. Nevertheless, a garden is planned for 2016.

The 2011 NEK Food System Plan called for diverse region-wide Food Security Task Task Force to address hunger and food insecurity, particularly as it relates to the regional food system.

In December 2015, the first Northeast Kingdom Hunger Council met in Barton. Meetings will be quarterly.

¹ Vermont Public Radio, December 28, 2015