



Community Food Access Assessment

for the Quaboag Valley Food Policy Council

July 2024

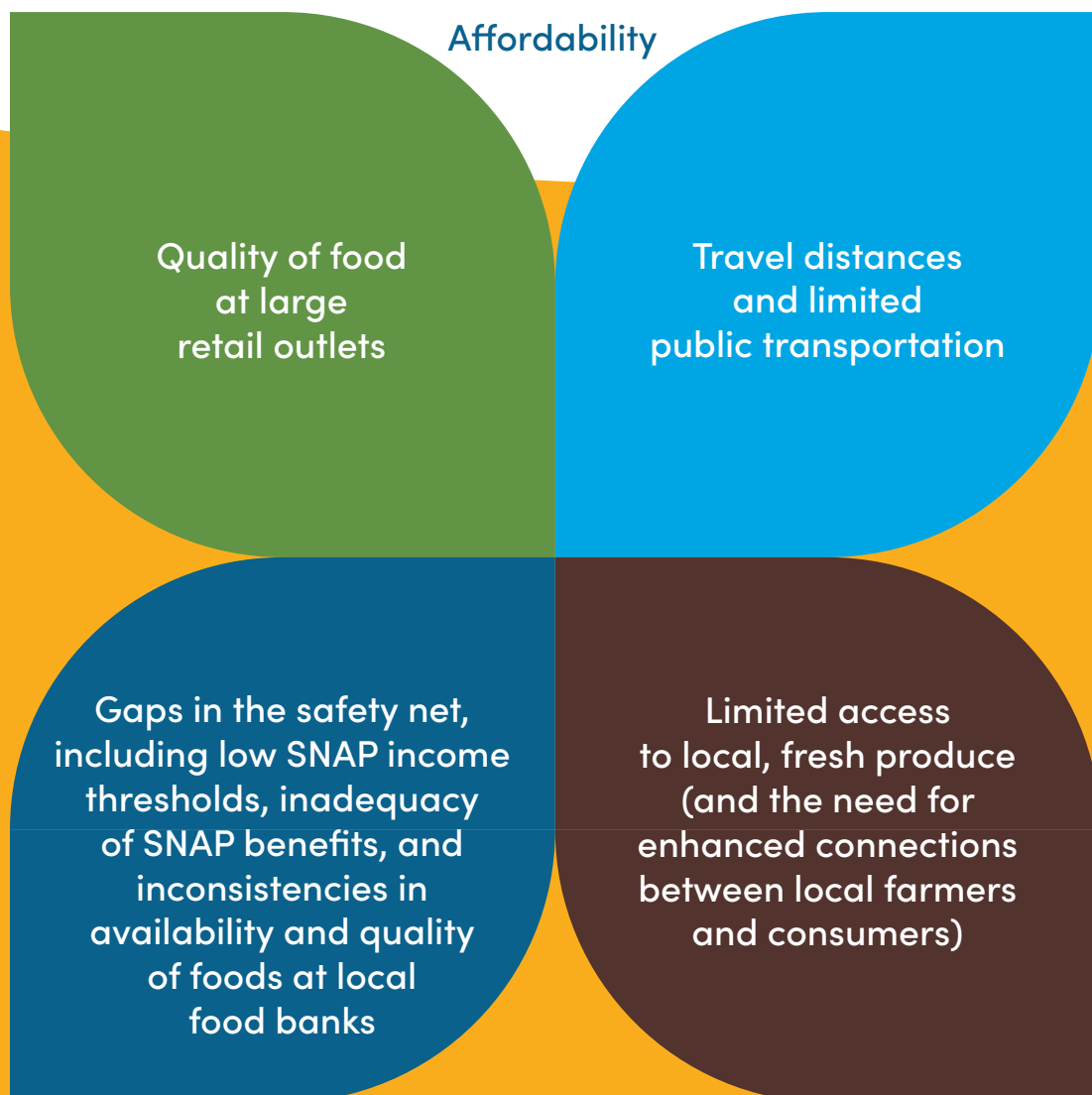
Introduction

The Collaborative for Educational Services (CES) and food access consultants Kia Aoki and Alexandra Mello have been working with the Quaboag Valley Food Policy Council (QVFPC, or FPC) since January 2024 to design and implement a food access assessment to inform FPC planning. This report summarizes the findings regarding food access issues experienced by a wide range of Quaboag Valley residents. The study was designed to complement assessment work being conducted by the Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission, which will provide related findings regarding food access tied to geographic and socioeconomic data.

Key Findings

Participants in the conversations consistently noted an appreciation of several assets of the Quaboag Valley region. Many described living in quiet, peaceful communities, where they feel connected to each other and to the towns. At the same time, the small-town and rural nature of the region can make access to healthy, affordable food challenging.

Key issues affecting access to healthy food include:



Methods

The Collaborative for Educational Services (CES) worked together with QVFPC to design this project with two primary objectives:



Gather information from community residents on food access opportunities and barriers in the Quaboag Valley region.



Build skills, capacity, and investment among community members to engage with their neighbors and organizations around food access issues.

In order to address these two objectives, CES:

Developed and implemented a training for Quaboag Valley residents and service providers

Developed individual and group interview protocols

Analyzed and synthesized notes from community conversations that were led by trained residents

Hosted a sense-making session with trained resident-interviewers to create group consensus on key findings

Training:

CES trained Quaboag Valley residents in effective techniques for gathering information and stories from community members. These residents were invited to engage with community members with whom they were connected. CES trained 12 people on April 29, 2024 in a three-hour session.

Protocols and Planning:

CES developed interview protocols for one-on-one and small group interviews, and worked closely with the QVFPC to support the team of community interviewers. QVFPC staff arranged for several group conversations, and scheduled the community volunteers to facilitate and take notes at these events. Community volunteers scheduled their own one-on-one conversations with neighbors, friends, people they encountered in community spaces, and people they work with in social service organizations.

Community Conversations:

Community volunteers were responsible for tracking their conversations and documenting and submitting information to the QVFPC via an electronic portal. Some provided detailed notes from their conversations, others provided a summary or highlights of what they learned.

Over the period of about 6 weeks in May and June 2024, community interviewers conducted 22 interviews, 2 community drop-in events, and 4 small group chats. Participants in the interviews included consumers, farmers, and professionals involved in supporting families. The residents included in these conversations represent:

Towns: Belchertown, Brimfield, Hardwick, Ludlow, Monson, Palmer, Ware, Warren, North Brookfield, West Brookfield

Different life stages and positions: parents with young children, parents of teens, widowers, people who worked in office settings, farmers, residents who shop at farmers markets

The sample of people interviewed in this process is likely not representative of the full Quaboag Valley region (see Limitations).

Analysis:

The CES team conducted a thematic analysis of all notes provided by the community interviewers, and compiled high level findings to reflect on with interviewers during the sense-making session.

Sense-Making Session:

On July 1, 2024, CES hosted a sense-making session to which all interviewers were invited to chat informally about the process. Five of the 12 interviewers attended, along with a QVFPC staff person who attended the community chats. CES began by offering appreciation for the interviewers and the work they did. The conversation continued with some framing questions:



1. How did the interviews go for you?

- a. What worked well?
- b. What do you wish you had known?



2. What did you hear?

- a. What were some common themes?
- b. Any big aha's or surprises?
- c. Were there any groups you heard from that had particular needs, assets, conditions, etc.?

The conversation helped CES, QVFPC, and the community interviewers develop a more thorough understanding of the interview process as well as the issues and nuances affecting residents' experiences.

Limitations

Representation:

This study was designed to ensure that data was collected by community members in the towns served by QVFPC, and not by outside professional researchers. The nature of this project meant that these community-based researchers were in large part responsible for generating their own sample of respondents. As a result, the population of those interviewed is not representative of the Quaboag Valley:



While we do not have complete data about participants, we believe that the respondents do not adequately reflect the socioeconomic, educational, and employment status of the region as a whole. Qualitative data, in this case collected via a series of semi-structured interviews and conversations, seeks to provide personal and nuanced understandings of the circumstances, experiences and perspectives of QV residents. This means that the findings are representative of the views of those we spoke with, who related both their own stories and those of neighbors and family. While these stories may not comprehensively represent the views of all QV residents and communities, they nonetheless allow us to identify some common assets and challenges faced by residents in the region.

Also, given the wide geographic spread and characteristics of this region, it is important to note that the issues and needs in some of the small remote towns will vary considerably from those experienced by people living in larger towns or suburban areas. The sample does have a mix of these areas represented, but we cannot say that needs across the whole region are adequately reflected in these findings.

Data Quality:

The community-based researchers did an excellent job of scheduling and conducting interviews and submitting notes. However, given the range of backgrounds among these volunteers, the level of detail provided in the notes they submitted is inconsistent. Also, CES did not receive notes from two of the individual interviews and two of the small group chats.

CES analysts lacked the detailed understanding or insights that would have come from attending these sessions in person. However, the notes provided allowed CES to identify key themes, unique experiences, and common issues faced in the Quaboag Valley. CES's analysis was also informed by the sense-making session, which included a staff person who was present at some of the community chats from which notes were missing, along with four of the interviewers.

Accuracy:

The findings primarily represent the perspectives and experiences of consumers. Some of their understandings may not be accurate – for example, their understanding of how SNAP benefits work, or the Quaboag Connector schedule. We are reflecting what we heard in these interviews, recognizing that it may not always be factual; in some cases, “inaccuracies” (or resident misunderstandings) may indicate the need for improved communication between providers and consumers.

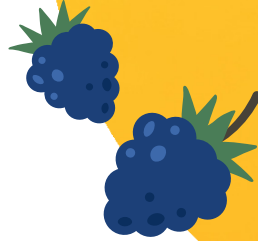


FINDINGS

We consolidated our findings into the following themes:

Community Assets
Access Barriers
Priority Needs
Opportunities

In addition, we provide recommendations for the QVFPC to increase community involvement in outreach and assessment work.



Community Assets:

1. Most community members appreciate the quality of life in their towns. Many highlighted the small and quiet neighborhoods and community connectedness.
2. Many residents are connected to local resources, including churches, senior centers, and food banks. So me mentioned appreciating senior centers and other community meal options.
3. The Quaboag Valley is largely a rural area. As such, it offers a wide array of local agriculture, farmers markets, and CSAs. Farmers appear eager to meet local needs, and local residents are interested in fresh, local produce.
4. Most community members appear to have grocery market options within a 15-20 minute drive. Almost all note the need to have a car, or a friend or family member with a car, to access most shopping options.
5. Consumers are price-sensitive and many are aware of the variety of options to save money. Some mentioned senior discount days at their local supermarket. Others mentioned driving longer distances to urban markets or wholesale clubs.
6. Consumers who have access to public transport (vans, Quaboag Connector, etc.) acknowledge that they have some options where other towns have none.

Access Barriers:

1. Distance and Time:

- Almost all residents need to travel at least 10-15 minutes for food options beyond a local package store. Many travel for 20 minutes or more.
- Many residents typically use supermarkets in the region, such as Hannafords, Stop & Shop, and Big Y.
- Others travel outside the region, mentioning Trader Joe's, Whole Foods, and stores in Holyoke, Springfield, and Worcester for their food shopping needs.
- Those with particular ethnic or dietary preferences are likely to require additional travel time.

2. Transportation:

- It was evident that to get to food, most people needed a car or access to a car.
- Most residents have a car, but still face significant barriers due to distance, time, and cost.
- Public transportation is inadequate and options like the Quaboag Connector are considered too expensive, inconvenient, or not user-friendly.
- Parents with children described the challenges of trying to use public transportation with children and carrying groceries for the whole family.
- The Senior Center bus has a 7 mile radius limit that is restrictive.

3. Quality and Availability:

- Many residents rely on large supermarkets or discount stores like Walmart, Hannafords, Stop & Shop, and Big Y for their routine grocery shopping.
- Those who shop at large discount stores are dissatisfied with the quality of produce. One resident noted "[I] always can get food, even if it's cheap or unhealthy."
- While many residents described frequenting farm stands and farmers markets, others described a lack of access to affordable fresh, local, high-quality produce.
- Some residents lack awareness of farmers market schedules and locations.
- Food pantries were criticized for not offering fresh options and providing poor quality food, or running out of preferred foods.
- Consumers noted special cuisines that they seek on a routine basis or as something special that they enjoy but don't have very often. These include seafood/sushi, and Indian, Asian, Puerto Rican, and Italian foods.
- Elderly, disabled, and housebound individuals, especially in food deserts like Warren, have limited shopping options. Several described having to shop at the local convenience or package store.



4. Cost:

- Affordability is a major concern for all. Consumers are price sensitive, and some choose supermarkets based on available discounts.
- Residents indicate that SNAP benefits are inadequate and have not kept pace with rising costs.
- Farmers markets are often too expensive, and CSA options are reported to be of poor quality with limited choices.
- Additional “hidden” costs include the transportation or time it takes to get to and from shopping options; the need to ask friends or family for rides; the need to adjust to various schedules for senior centers, food banks, etc.; and/or the challenges involved in signing up for and accessing benefit programs.

5. Benefit Programs:

- Many residents are familiar with and/or take advantage of a range of food access support options, including SNAP, WIC, food pantries, school lunch programs, and meals on wheels. There is less familiarity with HIP.
- Consumers appear to primarily hear about food access options through word of mouth from neighbors and various types of community centers.
- Many noted that the SNAP income eligibility threshold is too low.
- Many residents are not familiar with the Healthy Incentives Program (HIP), while others indicate that HIP is difficult to use, as it lacks enough participating farmers markets and cannot be used at supermarkets.
- In some communities, families do not have access to the school lunch program during the summer months, or to expanded summer food programs for children.
- Some farmers described technological and administrative barriers to participating in the HIP program.

6. Technology and Delivery:

- Some residents, particularly seniors and those with limited incomes, face technological challenges for online grocery ordering.
- Delivery costs associated with online grocery shopping are prohibitively high.



Priority Needs

Interviews uncovered community assets and challenges faced by many Quaboag Valley residents in securing affordable and healthy food. As we looked at the results across individuals and groups, we identified several priority areas to enhance access and address barriers.

1. Access to Fresh, Local, Organic Produce and Meat:

- Enhanced access to fresh, local, and organic produce
- Affordable and geographically convenient farmers markets, community gardens, and public orchards
- Community gardens located at or near low-income housing
- Affordable meats from local farmers

2. Food Pantry Improvements:

- Consumers are seeking fresh, appropriate, and higher quality food options at local food pantries.
- Food pantry hours are sometimes restrictive
- Consumers vented about food pantries: some interviewees mentioned having had bad experiences, and then telling their friends about these experiences. This can create broader negative perceptions. In contrast, creating opportunities for consumers to provide input into needed improvements can channel energy and new thinking into food pantry design, offerings, policy, and practice.
- Farmers and consumers were interested in seeing farmer surplus provided to food pantries and other outlets to ease access to fresh produce.

3. SNAP and HIP Improvements:

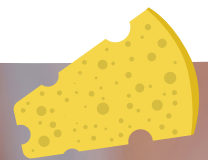
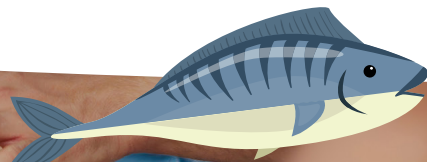
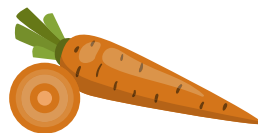
- Residents, especially in vulnerable populations (low income, speakers of languages other than English, newer residents), would benefit from a greater understanding of the range of benefit options and assistance in applying.
- SNAP does not provide adequate benefits to address family needs.
- Consumers would like SNAP benefits to cover essential non-food items like toilet paper and soap. Some reported the challenge of not being able to use SNAP for services like Instacart.
- More farmers need to be able to participate in HIP, and the program needs to be more accessible.

4. Discount Offers:

- Residents value discount offers, and are willing to travel to various stores to access discounts. Making these more accessible across the range of shopping options could make healthy food more accessible.

5. Nutrition Education:

- Many residents lack information on how to prepare some of the local produce options.
- Those with a typical “meat and potatoes” diet are particularly hard hit when meat prices increase. Several noted a lack of knowledge about how to make healthy meals without meat.
- Several suggested food access, food preparation, and nutrition education programs, especially for youth.



Opportunities for QV FPC

The QVFPC is well positioned to address several of these priority needs. The Council has relationships among many of the service providers and community centers that residents rely on. Among the priority needs identifies, the FPC may want to consider:

- Increasing the participation of consumers on the Council to inform change grounded in lived experience, or supporting food pantries, senior centers, transportation providers, and others in involving consumers in refining practices.
- Building on the community centers (such as senior centers, low-income housing, food pantries, churches, and farmers markets) that residents are already accustomed to using throughout the region to share information, or create one-stop shops for accessing multiple services – e.g., food distribution and signing up for benefits.
 - Similarly, education and service program outreach can build on strong neighborhood or neighbor-to-neighbor connections. Many residents learn about options through their neighbors and many are fortunate to have supportive community connections.
- Creating multiple methods for sharing recipes and nutrition information to support residents' use of local produce. Consider creating videos shared via social media and hard copies of recipes at all settings where food is distributed.
- Using the results of the Planning Commission study to advocate for enhanced transportation options for those residential centers that are most isolated, and for services that meet residents' needs – e.g., buses/vans that can be entered/exited easily, services for families that do not require having to pay for each child, appropriate hours, space to store groceries.
- Working with food pantries and resident groups to ensure quality and availability of a variety of desirable food options, as well as creating delivery systems that are respectful of pantry users.
- Working with local grocery stores to create more discount programs for low income families and seniors.

- Supporting farmers in participating in HIP, helping them overcome technology and administrative barriers.
 - Working with farmers, markets, and consumer groups to provide alternate channels for distribution of excess produce from local farms. For example, create transportation options for pick-up and delivery of excess produce, organize gleaning groups, or support mobile farmers markets to bring produce to the more isolated housing areas.
 - Advocating for expanded SNAP benefits.
 - Creating consumer information campaigns to ensure that residents are well informed about how SNAP and HIP benefits can be used, transportation options, and other benefits. Ensure that information is provided in a variety of appropriate languages and formats.
 - Building a central resource center that provides information on many of these issues: transportation, access to benefits, nutrition, recipes, schedules for local farmers markets and food pantries, etc. Promote the center effectively through multiple channels. Create an easily-accessible online presence for centralized access to information, and offer other modalities, including a local one-call resource and information booths at community locations (e.g., food pantries, farmers markets, senior centers).

We encourage the FPC to seek out further consumer input as it moves forward in addressing specific challenges.



Recommendations to Support Future Community Involvement

Based on feedback from interviewers, here are some tips for future community involvement in assessment and outreach work:

- Offer a well structured process and protocols – this makes it easier for community members to participate
- Provide flexible ways to engage: for example, some interviewers were not comfortable using technology for note taking or submitting notes
- Provide ongoing support and a key contact person to coordinate and address issues as they arise
- Staff organizing of some group chats is valuable, making it easier for interviewers to plug in to
- Informal and relationship-based interviews made for a relaxed context for interviewees
- For individual interviews, it's best to ask the interviewer to take notes. Having an extra person there taking notes could be too formal or intimidating for the interviewee.
- Gift cards should be for local businesses or food places such as Big Y or Stop and Shop. Using Amazon cards introduces a technical barrier for some community members. Again, offering flexible options is important given the diversity of shopping options across the Quaboag Valley region.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The report highlights the significant barriers to food access for Quaboag Valley residents, emphasizing the need for improvements in affordability, accessibility, and benefit adequacy. Addressing these issues through community-focused solutions like affordable farmers markets, mobile markets to bring farmers markets to residents, enhanced targeted transportation systems, improved food pantries, and enhanced benefit programs could greatly enhance food availability and quality for residents and the wider community.

Recommended Next Steps:

- Share the findings broadly and interactively to get community input and engage community members in conversations and future efforts.
- Invite interviewers and interviewees to join the FPC and shape the agenda moving forward
- Explore opportunities and build solutions to ease the “hidden cost” of access (e.g., a hub or connector to ease access to resources, information, supports, and food)
- Build on strong community centers and networks throughout the region
- Build connections between local farmers and consumers, and increase opportunities for consumers to access local, fresh food
- Engage service recipients (users) in planning to address gaps





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