

Seniors and Food Access in Preston County, West Virginia

West Virginia is projected to be one of the grayest States in both the nation and world by 2030.¹

Interview results with seniors were classified according to the five dimensions of food access.

Availability: the adequacy of the supply of healthy food (e.g. the number of places to buy produce).

While some towns within Preston County **do not have grocery stores** or other sources of nutrition, food is available within the County in the form of large box retail grocery stores, smaller grocery stores, food pantries, and farmer's markets. Seniors with greater physical mobility like to garden and grow vegetables.

Accessibility: the geographic location of the food supply and ease of getting to that location.

Long drives to food sources are common place in Preston County. Many of the elderly describe problems with acquiring available food due to poor health (i.e., difficult to stand and walk), intermittent or no transportation, **isolation**, and limited social or family relationships. The elderly with neighbors, family members, friends, and a social network have a greater chance of accessing food during periods of harsh weather, lack of transportation, or an illness. The risk of having to go without food increases in the winter because access to sources of food including grocery stores, food pantries or the senior centers is impassable.

Affordability: food prices and people's perceptions of worth relative to food cost.

Every elderly participant reported issues with the affordability of food. Those with lower incomes often have to **choose between medicine**, car repairs, utilities, **or food**. Those with higher levels of income did not have to choose between everyday needs and food but rather made choices between price and quality. Support in the form of SNAP (formerly known as food stamps) or other food resources carried with it additional implications for the elderly. First, benefits levels at \$15-16 per month did not offer much security. Next, several reports were made about the elderly being too prideful to seek assistance. Last, we found that elderly grandparents are now taking in grandchildren and foregoing additional income benefits rather than running the risk of losing the children to social services.

Acceptability: an individual's attitude regarding the attributes of their local food environment and whether or not the given supply of products meets their personal standards.

Many of the elderly participants prefer fresh produce. The participants agreed that fresh, **quality fruits and vegetables** were expensive in relation to their **fixed income**. While charities are valued, some participants commented on their health issues and the nutritional value of food available at food pantries. Participants expressed appreciation for the quality and cost of meals provided at the Senior Center.

Accommodation: how well local food sources accept and adapt to local residents' needs (i.e. store hours or types of payment accepted).

The elderly participants were very specific about the **need for vendors to provide** more shopping carts, assistance with carrying groceries, handicapped parking spaces, and accessible store shelving. They expressed a need for a mechanism or system that would regularly check on **isolated seniors** and assist with meal preparation and grocery delivery. Seniors had problems with the large quantities of food available for purchase. They felt like it was a waste of money to buy large quantities that might spoil before it was consumed.

The **solutions proposed** by the elderly participants are categorized under three conditions: 1) Isolation; 2) Physical impairment or illness; and 3) Financial hardship.

Isolation

Participants living without a retail store in their city expressed an interest in acquiring a grocery store. Possible solutions include **tax credits or subsidies for developers to build grocery stores** in places where there are none available within a designated distance.

In the case of isolation due to illness or lack of transportation, the elderly suggest a **grocery delivery service**. According to the seniors this service was available in the late 80s or early 90s by a small box grocery store that closed due to competition from a large box retailer.

Another suggested solution for isolation is to have a service that would check on the elderly based on a roster of registered seniors in the County.

Physical Impairment

Seniors describe physical impairments that hinder their ability to carry groceries into their residence and store the food properly. The elderly also describe problems in grocery stores with reaching up high, bending down low or retrieving products that are pushed back on shelves. They also cannot easily read labels that are too small, up high or down low. This problem, as suggested by the elderly, might be addressed if grocery stores designated employees to watch out for and **assist elderly customers**. Another suggested solution is a service that helped the elderly transport groceries at the point of purchase.

Financial Hardship

In the case of financial hardship, it was suggested that retailers **expand senior discount days**. Another suggestion is to create a reporting system to document and publish the prices displayed in stores to help seniors be better prepared to make shopping choices. From a policy standpoint, an increase is needed in senior's SNAP food supplement of \$16 per month. Last, state social services agencies should look into issues with seniors that take in grandchildren.

SUMMARY

| Dimensions of Food Access | Grade | Comments |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Availability Are there sources for food? | A- | The adequacy of the supply of healthy food (e.g. presence of certain types of restaurants near people's homes, or the number of places to buy produce. |
| Accessibility Can the elderly get to or make use of the food that is available? | F | The geographic location of the food supply and ease of getting to that location. |
| Affordability Are the elderly able to pay for the food that is available? | D | Food prices and people's perceptions of worth relative to food cost. |
| Accommodation Do food sources respond to the needs of the elderly? | B- | How well local food sources accept and adapt to local residents' needs (i.e. store hours or types of payment accepted). |
| Acceptability Does the food available meet the standards of the elderly? | D | An individual's attitude regarding the attributes of their local food environment and whether or not the given supply of products meets their personal standards. |

¹West Virginia Bureau of Senior Services State Plan on Aging October 1, 2012 – September 30, 2014

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