

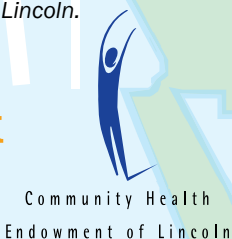
Healthy Food Access Assessment and Recommendations

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Healthy Food Access is a collaborative program of Community Action Partnership of Lancaster and Saunders Counties and Food Bank of Lincoln funded by Community Health Endowment of Lincoln.





Introduction

In 2015, Community Health Endowment of Lincoln (CHE) released *Place Matters*, a series of maps highlighting areas of need in specific segments within the city of Lincoln. The Place Matters project sought to answer the question: “How does where we live, learn, work, and play affect our health?” It was also intended to inspire Lincoln area service providers and decision makers to take a deeper look at their city – to identify disparities and needs as they exist on a neighborhood level, and to plan projects to address them.

Two years after the initial report, CHE released *Place Matters More Than Ever*, which included updated maps and added two more, including one depicting access to healthy food in Lincoln. The healthy food access map combined data

from 204 Lincoln food stores and vehicle ownership rates to show areas of the city with the lowest access to healthy food. The healthy food access map was eye opening in that clear parallels could be drawn between it and the childhood obesity map. Indeed, neighborhoods in Lincoln with the lowest access to healthy food were also those with the highest childhood obesity rates.

The maps were clearly telling a story.

CHE encouraged the community to act – to design programs that would reduce disparities evident on the maps. Several organizations gathered with CHE to discuss needs observed, including Community Action Partnership of Lancaster and Saunders Counties (Community Acton), Food Bank of Lincoln, Southwood Lutheran Church, Salvation Army, Lincoln-Lancaster County Health Department, and Nebraska Extension. Conversations were fruitful, and eventually lead to the joint forming of a proposal by Community Action and the Food



The Healthy Food Access Program celebrated its launch on May 14, 2019 at Community Action.

Bank that would increase access to healthy food for Lincoln’s children. The goals of the proposed project were as follows:

- 1) Children and families in low food access/high poverty neighborhoods will gain increased access to fresh produce.
- 2) Children participating in Food Bank’s Summer Food Service Program and Community Action Head Start will gain increased access to nutritious meals.
- 3) Local schools, nonprofit organizations, and healthcare facilities serving meals to children will gain increased access to affordable, locally sourced foods and food waste will be reduced.
- 4) Healthy Food Access Program workers will be equipped with the knowledge and skills to provide effective programming and promote healthy behavior changes among those served.

Thanks to a legacy grant from CHE, the proposal became a reality, and the Healthy Food Access Program was born. With CHE’s investment, Community Action was able to construct a full commercial kitchen



used primarily to prepare fresh, nutritious meals for children in Community Action Head Start, the Food Bank's Summer Food Service Program, and other early care centers across the city. Partners, Kinder Bites, LLC, a business specializing in preparing nutritious food for children, and Lone Tree Foods, a local food distribution company that works with over 40 local farmers, were brought in as leasers of the kitchen to achieve project goals. Additionally, Food Bank of Lincoln was able to purchase a truck, appropriately named "Lincoln Fresh", used to deliver free, fresh produce to Lincoln neighborhoods with low healthy food access and high poverty/childhood obesity rates.

The program officially launched in the spring of 2019 and has already produced tremendous outcomes. As of December 31st:

- 108,647 pounds of produce have been delivered to 12,985 people via Lincoln Fresh;
- 413,662 nutritious meals have been prepared for Lincoln children in the Healthy Food Access Kitchen;
- \$220,265 worth of locally-produced food has been stored and packaged for distribution in the Healthy Food Access Kitchen; and

- 77 Healthy Food Access staff have been trained by Nebraska Extension to provide effective programming and promote healthy behavior changes among those served by the project.

The impact of the Healthy Food Access Program has been significant already. CHE's investment has developed systems that will continue to produce positive outcomes well into the future. The following report offers a deeper assessment of the program, highlighting underlying need, recapping progress achieved thus far, reviewing existing community resources, and providing recommendations for future expansion.





Community Need: A Case for the Healthy Food Access Program



The Healthy Food Access Program was born out of need in the Lincoln community – need that was evident in the 2016 version of CHE’s healthy food access map. Evidence of this need encouraged Community Health Endowment (CHE) to prioritize providing healthy food to children. While the 2019 version of the map depicted here shows progress, there is still work to be done to ensure access to healthy food for all of Lincoln’s residents. The Healthy Food Access Program has

been addressing this need since 2018.

Societal norms make maintaining a healthy diet difficult, regardless of income level. In fact, a larger percentage of those with higher income consumed fast food than those with lower income. Overall, 32% of lower-income (less than or equal to 130% of the federal poverty level [FPL]), but 42% of higher-income (greater than 350% of FPL) adults consumed fast food on a given day.¹ But for families with low income, choice in selecting food is more limited. And often, foods are chosen not based on preference, but rather, affordability.

Need is evident locally. Within Lincoln Public Schools, while progress is being made, 29% of students are either overweight or obese. In addition, according to the Lincoln-Lancaster County Community Food Assessment, published by the Lincoln-Lancaster County Food Policy Council in 2016, “less than 1 in 4 Nebraskan adults consumed the recommended 5+ servings of fruits and vegetables per day.”²

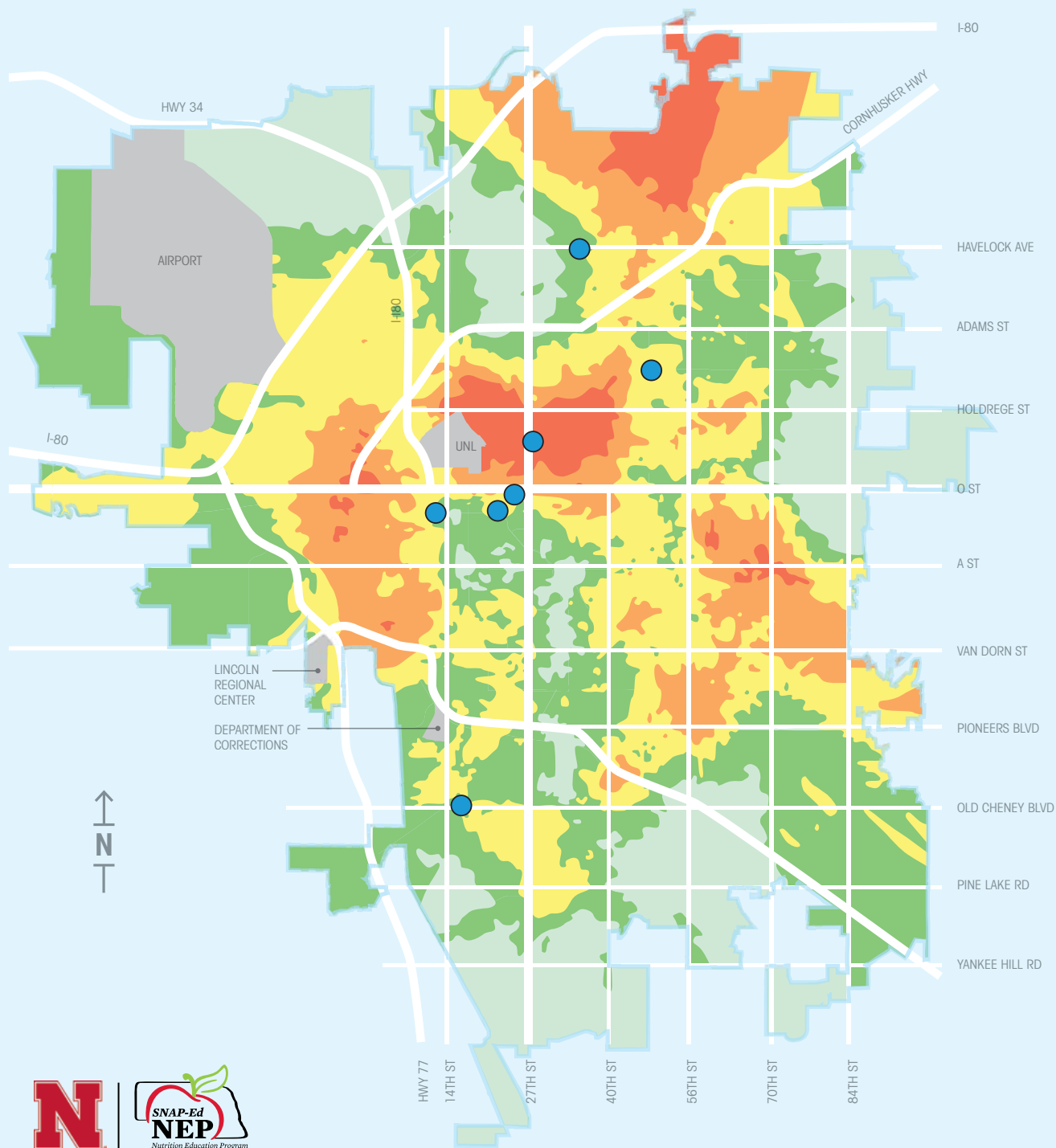
Similar numbers are reflected in the Feeding Infants and Toddlers Study (FITS), which provided data on the dietary patterns of



3,022 infants and toddlers. The study showed that ...4 to 24 month old children typically consumed significant amounts of developmentally inappropriate, energy-dense, nutrient-poor foods. Of particular concern was the finding that 18 to 33% of infants and toddlers consumed no distinct servings of vegetables on a typical day, and when vegetables were consumed, the most common choice was french fries. Additionally, reported energy intakes exceeded requirements by 10 to 30%. Unfortunately, there is also evidence that these patterns tend to persist throughout childhood and into adolescence, and that diet quality tracks and declines from early childhood through adolescence.³

(continued)





- Highest Access
-
-
-
-
- Lowest Access
- Choose Healthy Here Locations
- Excluded
- City Limits

Data Source: Nebraska Extension,
U.S. Census Bureau
Map: City of Lincoln Urban Development

Healthy Food Access 2019

In 2019, Nebraska Extension completed a follow-up to their 2016 NebNEMS* survey of Lincoln food stores. This point-in-time observation recorded the availability of healthy food options (fruits with no added sugar, vegetables with no added sauce, lean protein, low-fat dairy, and whole grains) in 235 stores. This map shows improvements in access due in part to Nebraska Extension's "Choose Healthy Here" program in convenience stores. However, the impact of the 2018 closure of a grocery store in north central Lincoln is apparent. Efforts such as Double Up Food Bucks and mobile distribution of free fruits and vegetables by Lincoln Fresh will likely have a positive impact.

* Nebraska Nutrition Environment Measures Survey



Community Need: A Case for the Healthy Food Access Program (continued)

There is a strong correlation between obesity rates and fruit and vegetable consumption. A healthy diet helps children grow properly and reduces their risk of developing chronic diseases, including obesity. Adults who eat a healthy diet live longer and have a lower risk of obesity, heart disease, type 2 diabetes, and certain cancers.⁴



Making it easy for children to eat a healthy diet will set them up for improved health for their entire lives. But multiple factors work against this. One is the aforementioned societal norms promoting consumption of fast, convenient, and unhealthy food. In addition, many other factors play into eating choices, which need to be addressed. The following pages provide a summary of some of these factors, and some potential solutions.

- 1 Fryar CD, Hughes JR, Herrick KA, Ahluwalia, N. Fast food consumption among adults in the United States, 2013-2016. NCHS Data Brief, no 322. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics. <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/databriefs/db322.htm>.
- 2 BRFSS Prevalence & Trends Data. National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion. September 13, 2017. <https://nccd.cdc.gov/BRFSSPrevalence/rdPage.aspx>
- 3 Birch, Dr. Leann, Savage, Jennifer S., Ventura, Alison. Influences on the Development of Children's Eating Behaviours: From Infancy to Adolescence. HHS Author Manuscript. May 7, 2009. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2678872/>.
- 4 Poor Nutrition. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. August 7, 2019. <https://www.cdc.gov/chronicdisease/resources/publications/factsheets/nutrition.htm>





Access to Healthy Food – Geographic and Other Challenges

Overall healthy food access is better in Lincoln than in previous years, due primarily to new grocery stores opening in multiple areas. However, certain areas of Lincoln continue to have limited access to healthy foods, especially for residents who don't have transportation. In particular, north central Lincoln stands out as being an area of high population density without full-size grocery stores. This area spans roughly from O Street to Leighton Avenue and 14th to 40th Streets.



Lincoln Fresh gives people the opportunity to choose from a wide range of produce to enjoy risk-free.

While opening a new supermarket is a significant undertaking, existing retail stores can add healthy options to their offerings far more easily. Nebraska Extension's Choose Healthy Here has worked with a convenience store in the high need area of north central Lincoln, as well as six other locations, to stock a selection of healthy food choices, such as low-fat yogurt, whole wheat pasta, non-fat milk, and fresh and frozen fruits and vegetables. Once the products are available, Choose Healthy Here programming is delivered to the community through store promotion and marketing, nutrition education, and in-store activities. This makes it more convenient for families to purchase such items.

Another significant source of food for families with limited resources in Lincoln is the food distribution system, including multiple FoodNet sites, and many locations stocked by Food Bank of Lincoln. Historically, food distribution sites have had limited healthy options, but that has changed significantly. The Food Bank has increased its refrigerated storage, and is now able to handle larger quantities of perishable foods (which are generally healthier options) and is receiving larger quantities of fresh fruits and vegetables from the USDA to distribute. The Food Bank currently sends 3 million pounds of produce per year to its agencies to distribute, representing 35% of the total food distributed.

Not everyone can get to a food distribution location due to transportation and other barriers, so as part of the Healthy Food Access Program, Lincoln Fresh was launched in 2019. It distributed over 108,000 pounds of fresh fruits and vegetables from April through



December. Lincoln Fresh visits a total of 16 locations on its alternate week schedule, with an emphasis on neighborhoods with low healthy food access and high poverty/obesity rates. Lincoln Fresh has been very well received among thousands of residents. One person explained; "My kids love fruits and vegetables, but I can't afford to buy enough for them. Lincoln Fresh makes such a difference."

Education and Nutritional Knowledge



Studies show that levels of education and nutritional knowledge play an even larger part in the foods we choose than where we have access. Researchers found that higher-income areas buy more healthy and nutritious foods, but that people who move to those areas from lower-income areas do not change their buying habits. In addition, the study found that “exposing low-income households to the same food-buying opportunities available to higher-income households would reduce nutritional inequality by only 9 percent.”⁵

One of the reasons that better food access doesn’t automatically change food consumption is that supermarkets don’t sell only healthy foods, they sell a wide range of products. Public policy changes can help encourage grocery store placement in areas where they are most needed, but additional education is also necessary for healthy eating habits to develop.

Nutrition education is a key influencer of food consumption. Food literacy is a term developed by researchers to quantify knowledge of cooking skills and nutritional best practices. Higher food literacy translates to decreased reliance on convenience foods, higher likelihood of cooking, and improved health. Most people know they need to eat better, but don’t know how to make that shift. Helping people understand how to regularly incorporate whole fruits, vegetables, and grains into their diets promotes well-being and reduces diet-related diseases.⁶

Creating long-term change in eating behaviors is challenging, as so many influences in our peer groups and mass media send contradictory messages. The FEAST (Food, Education, Access [to healthy foods], Support, Together) program has recently been implemented



FEAST provides opportunity to learn how to make healthy new recipes, such as zucchini noodles with lemon and tomato sauce.

in Lincoln by Community Action to support Early Head Start and Head Start parents in working toward behavioral changes. FEAST participants meet over a three-month period. Each week, they prepare nutritious recipes and discuss topics such as the dangers of processed foods and eating healthy on a budget. Participants have the opportunity to purchase healthy ingredients with provided grocery



scholarships and subsequently prepare meals learned in class at home. Initial outcomes of this intervention have been impressive. One participant, for example, lost a significant amount of weight and no longer displayed diabetic symptoms by the time she completed the intervention. The positive peer support of the group, she said, was a key motivator in her success. Another participant shared how much the discussions had helped her to reconsider her buying decisions while at the grocery store, and to get a bicycle.

Another local organization, Partnership for a Healthy Lincoln, recently received a grant from the Centers for Disease Control

and Prevention to improve health outcomes for Lincoln's residents. The close partnerships with different cultural agencies will reach a diverse audience effectively. For example, local cultural organizations now have advocates to assist their clients with breastfeeding, funded by the grant. The grant will continue to expand activities, such as cooking clubs and health fairs, and allow project partners to build upon data collection efforts to demonstrate the effectiveness of the interventions.

5 Eliminating 'Food Deserts' Won't Cure Nutritional Inequality. *The National Bureau of Economic Research*. Cambridge, MA. <https://www.nber.org/digest/feb18/w24094.shtml>.

6 Colatruglio, Sara & Slater, Joyce. *Food Literacy: Bridging the Gap between Food, Nutrition, and Well-Being*. 2014. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/269394694_Food_Literacy_Bridging_the_Gap_between_Food_Nutrition_and_Well-Being.



FEAST participants learn how to prepare a nutritious recipe during weekly group gathering.

Incentives



Incentivizing healthy food purchases has been shown to make a significant impact in buying decisions. Nebraska Extension's Double Up Food Bucks program doubles the value of SNAP (food stamp) benefits spent at participating markets and grocery stores, helping people secure fruits and vegetables while supporting local farmers. It has proven to be successful in rural and urban communities alike across the country. The Double Up program has grown to nine locations throughout Lincoln and Omaha. Usage rates are beginning to grow, but additional funding is needed

to increase the number of locations that participate, and to handle more participants. In addition, not all Lincoln farmers' markets accept SNAP payments, which limits the locations where consumers can use their SNAP benefits to purchase fresh, local food.



CHE board members and staff, and Community Action and Food Bank staff pose in front of Lincoln Fresh, spring of 2019.



Increasing Nutritional Content of Provided Meals

One way to improve the health of children is to focus on improving the nutritional content of meals that are already being provided to them. In this way, schools and care providers can help reduce socioeconomic disparities related to healthy food access.

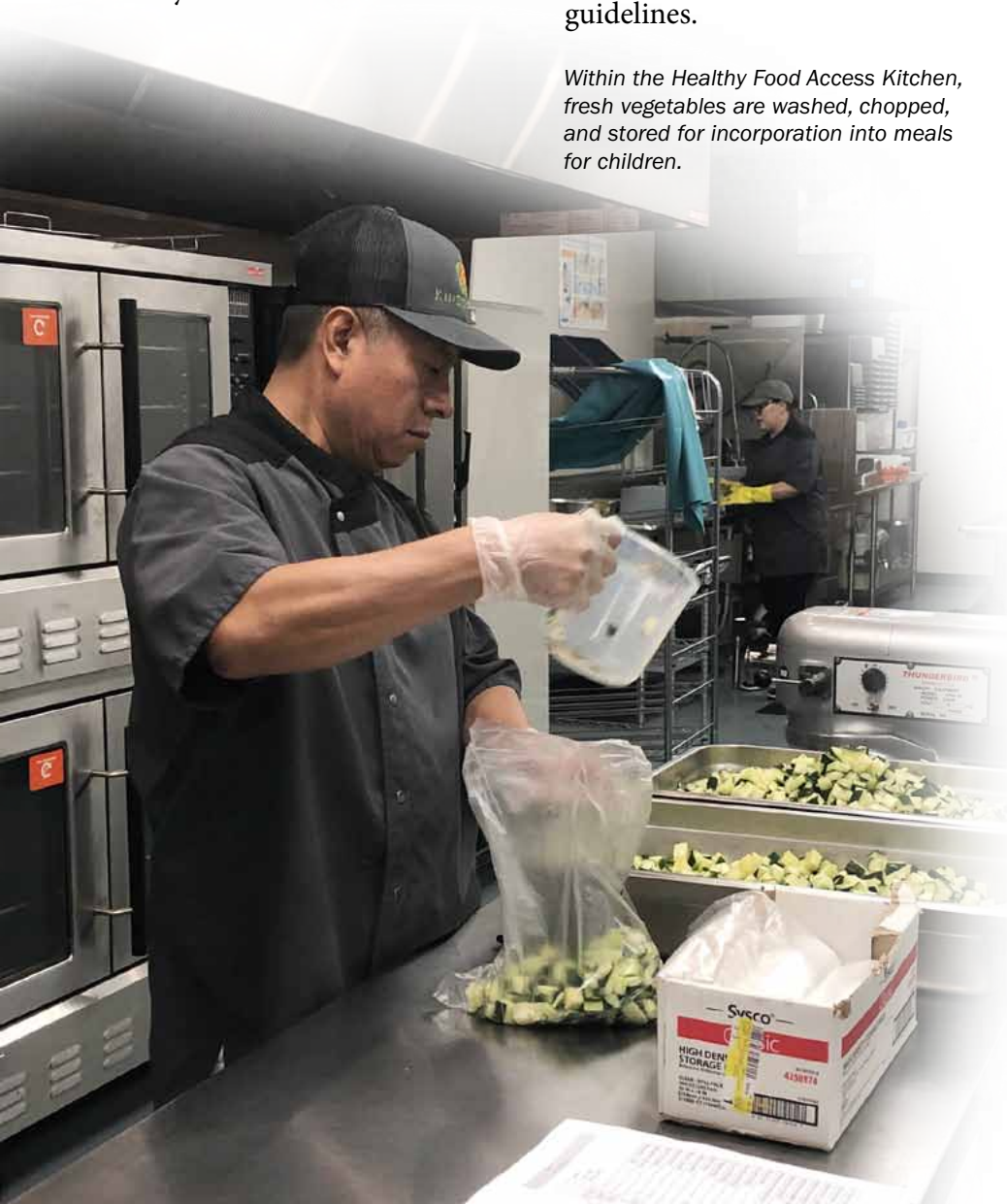
The Healthy Food Access Kitchen provides this opportunity with project partner Kinder Bites. The kitchen, based at Community Action Partnership of Lancaster and Saunders Counties at 210 O Street in Lincoln, was designed specifically to prepare healthy meals. With large cold storage units, ample space to chop vegetables, and tilt skillets to sauté fresh ingredients, there is great capacity to prepare fresh, healthy meals. Equipment to fry food was purposely not installed. Having this purpose-built kitchen allows Kinder Bites to keep meal preparation costs within the USDA reimbursement guidelines.

Within the Healthy Food Access Kitchen, fresh vegetables are washed, chopped, and stored for incorporation into meals for children.



Kinder Bites was contracted to prepare meals for the Food Bank's Summer Food Service Program, the free city-wide breakfast and lunch program for kids during the summer months. Kinder Bites prepares hot meals daily from scratch, using an abundance of fresh produce and other wholesome ingredients. Their goal is to exceed 90% unprocessed ingredients. Kinder Bites also prepares meals for Community Action's Head Start program and other early care providers.

School lunch quality has improved over the last few years. Lincoln Public Schools is preparing more foods in-house, and offering salad bars, veggies, and fruits more prominently to students. They also provide local food to students and highlight it on Nebraska Thursdays each month. In the 2019 school year so far, students have received 22,000 pounds of local chicken, 16,000 pounds of local produce, and over 2 million cartons of local milk.





Community and Ready-to-Eat Meals

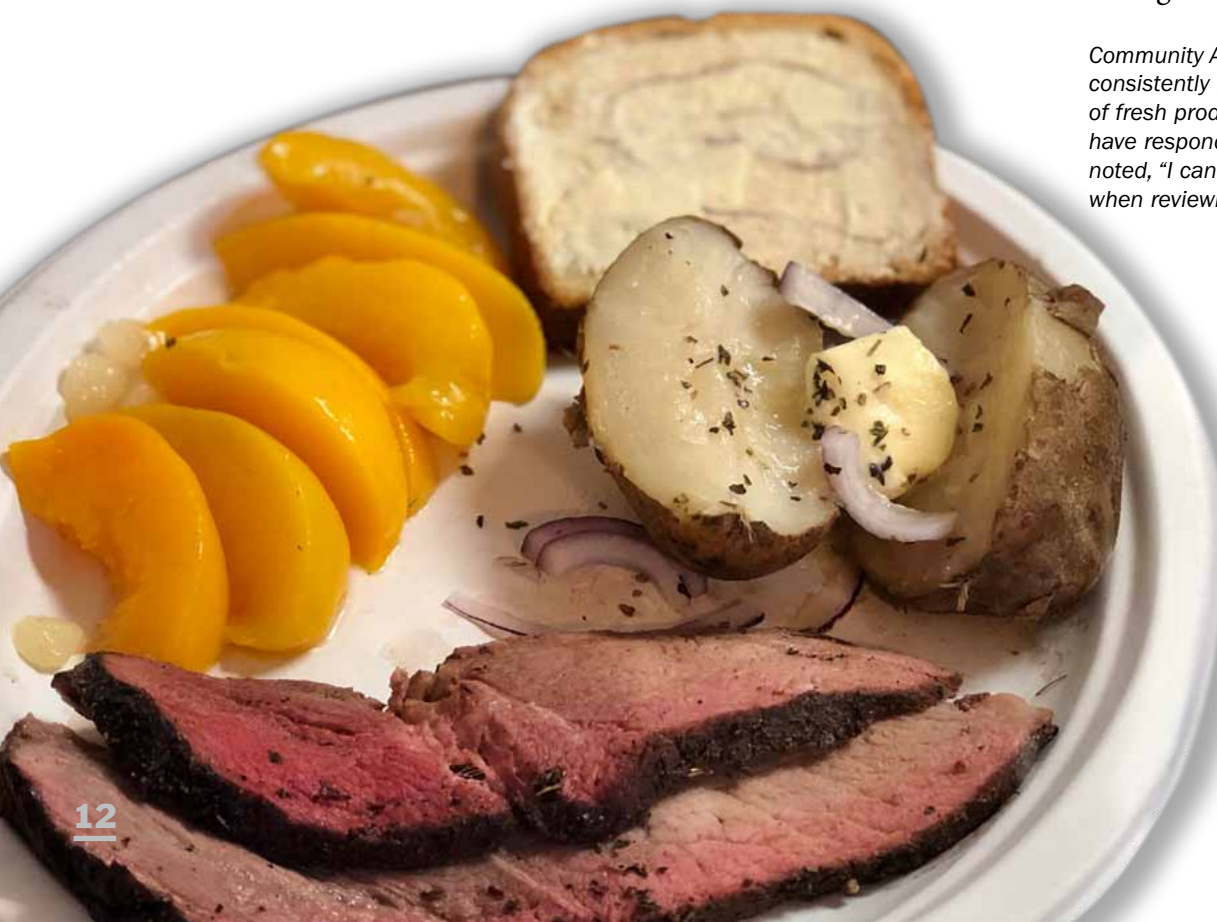


Multiple sites exist in Lincoln for congregate meals that are free of charge to consumers. But due to budget limitations, meals are not always as nutrient dense as would be optimal. Community Action's Gathering Place, which provides free evening meals five days a week, is one of these congregate meal sites. Over the past several years, the Gathering Place has focused on economically preparing meals that not only fill the stomach, but also meet the health and nutritional needs of its guests. The Gathering Place has set a goal for the last two years to assure that fresh content is included in all menus. During 2019, this goal was achieved 98% of the time. A partnership with Nebraska Extension has provided consulting to achieve this goal in a manner that best meets the health needs of those likely to dine at the Gathering Place.



For some families, however, access to existing free meal sites may be limited. Further research into whether additional sites are needed based on accessibility would be beneficial. Providing low-cost community meals (on a sliding fee scale) is another method to create a welcoming environment for a wide range of people. In the Los Angeles area, for example, Everytable is creating healthy ready-to-eat meals in a central kitchen, and then selling them at varying price points, depending on the neighborhood's average income.

Community Action's Gathering Place has consistently been increasing the amount of fresh product in meals served. Guests have responded favorably. One even noted, "I can't believe this is a free meal" when reviewing the contents of his plate.



Increasing Local Food Distribution



Lone Tree Foods is a producer-owned company based in eastern Nebraska, established in 2014 to connect local farmers with customers in Lincoln and Omaha. They work with more than 40 farms, and their space at the Healthy Food Access Kitchen is always overflowing with local fruits, vegetables, meats, cheeses, honey, and much more. The space gives Lone Tree the opportunity to expand their offerings to additional local institutions such as schools and hospitals, and expand their popular Nebraska Box for consumers. They currently offer bulk purchases to No More Empty

Pots, an organization focused on self-sufficiency in Omaha, which packages the Nebraska Boxes for families with limited resources. Lone Tree Foods could create a comparable program in Lincoln if a partnering organization is found. They are also open to creating smaller sized boxes for such a partnership. In addition, they could explore accepting SNAP or even Double Up Food Bucks to pay for the fresh food.

Meal Kits or Meal Preparation Programs

Exploring opportunities to make healthy meal preparation simpler and easier for families is another possibility. This could take the form of a “meal kit” model, similar to the popular mail-order programs, where a family would get all the ingredients they need to make a dish, in the amount they need, along with detailed easy-to-follow instructions. Families could buy ingredients at a low cost using SNAP benefits. Meal kits could also be made available to anyone in the community, which would subsidize kits for families with limited resources. Developing a program like this would require a coordinator, kitchen space, and packaging materials, but it has the potential to help many local families develop their healthy cooking skills. One food pantry has demonstrated increased interest in vegetables by providing the day’s selection arranged as a meal kit.⁷



Another potential model worthy of consideration is meal preparation programs, in which families could come to a central site and prepare a number of healthy meals for their families, which they would then freeze and use as needed. Families could buy ingredients on site using SNAP benefits, and then do the work to create their entrees. Again, this would help families develop their cooking skills, and save time by preparing multiple meals at one time.

⁷ Meal Kits and Recipe Tastings Increase Selection of Healthy Foods Among Food Pantry Clients. UCONN Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity. March 19, 2019. <https://www.enr.com/articles/57231-meal-kits-and-recipe-tastings-increase-selection-of-healthy-foods-among-food-pantry-clients>.





Recommendations

Lincoln/Lancaster County Food Policy Council

Joining the Lincoln/Lancaster County Food Policy Council is an important way to be a part of improving the local food system. The council develops and supports policy to increase food security, support local farmers, develop new markets, increase availability of land within the city to grow food, and improve food waste management. In addition to policy work, the council has implemented a number of food-related projects.

Farm to School Legislation

Farm to School activities have been proven to help students build healthy eating habits and support family farmers by expanding market opportunities. A bipartisan group of congressional leaders including Rep. Jeff Fortenberry demonstrated their support for growing Farm to School programming across the country by introducing the *Farm to School Act of 2019*. This act would continue to support the USDA Farm to School Grant Program, which provides funds on a competitive basis to schools, farmers, nonprofits, and local, state and tribal government entities to help schools procure local foods for school meals and to support Farm to

School activities like farm field trips, hands-on science classes, and new food taste tests. The *Kids Eat Local Act*, also sponsored by Rep. Fortenberry, would help to break down barriers between school food purchasers and family farmers by simplifying local purchasing guidelines for school meal programs. Both programs have been endorsed by the National Farm to School Network. Contacting congressional representatives to express support is key to their passage.

Increase Food Literacy

Programs like FEAST, as detailed earlier in the report, show dramatic results for participants increasing their food literacy, but are only able to reach a few people at a time. Continuing to increase the amount of food and nutrition education incorporated into existing programs for all ages is important for our city to improve our health indicators.

Set a Good Example

Organizations should consider their own practices when it comes to purchasing food for meetings and those attending their programming. Simple changes such as offering nutritious snacks, like vegetables and hummus and plain popcorn, and beverages, like water and unsweetened tea, can be easily implemented to set a positive tone for the whole community. Most people appreciate the opportunity to eat healthy foods, and by making this simple change, we can all encourage change for the better.

Ask Questions

Parents and caregivers of school-age children are encouraged to advocate

for healthier food options for their children. Parents and caregivers often have a strong influence within their child's educational institution when voiced.

Expand Grocery Store Options

One innovative model, the Illinois Fresh Food Fund, provides funding to new grocery stores in the form of loans and grants. Stores in underserved neighborhoods work with community partners, who promote health and nutrition through cooking classes, recipes, and healthy food coupons. Lincoln might consider whether implementing such a model would be effective.

USDA Child and Adult Care Food Program Reimbursement Rates

The rates set by the USDA can be challenging to stretch to cover more fruits and vegetables, but it can be done. Extension's Go NAPSACC program is a great resource. An alternative is for organizations to find supplemental private funding to increase their food budgets. Individual donors could help fill the gap, or check the Nebraska Farm to School page for grant sources.



Some states have passed legislation that provides additional funds for schools that use local foods in meals. Lawmakers consider it a win for both kids, who get access to more healthy, fresh foods, and for local farmers who increase their sales. Further exploration of this idea in Nebraska would be beneficial. The Nebraska Food Council is a great resource, with their existing Farm to School work.

Increase SNAP and Double Up Usage

Consumers using SNAP can double their benefits by purchasing produce at certain grocery stores and farmers markets. Double Up Food Bucks can then be used to purchase more fruits and vegetables. Usage rates are growing, as well as knowledge of the program. Organizations working with families using SNAP should promote use of the program. Additional funding would increase participating locations, including both grocery stores and farmers markets.

Distribute More Fresh Food

Stops for the Lincoln Fresh truck continue to be popular, demonstrating a demand for fresh produce throughout Lincoln. This model project has the potential to grow, as there have been many requests for evening hours and additional locations, and the Food Bank would like to meet this need. However, additional funding would be needed to cover the staff hours for these expanded hours and locations.

Expanding Meal Options

Creative partnerships with existing or new partners could develop meal kits for SNAP recipients, low-cost healthy meals to pick up, or low-cost communal meals. External funding may be needed to launch such projects.

Kitchen Incubator

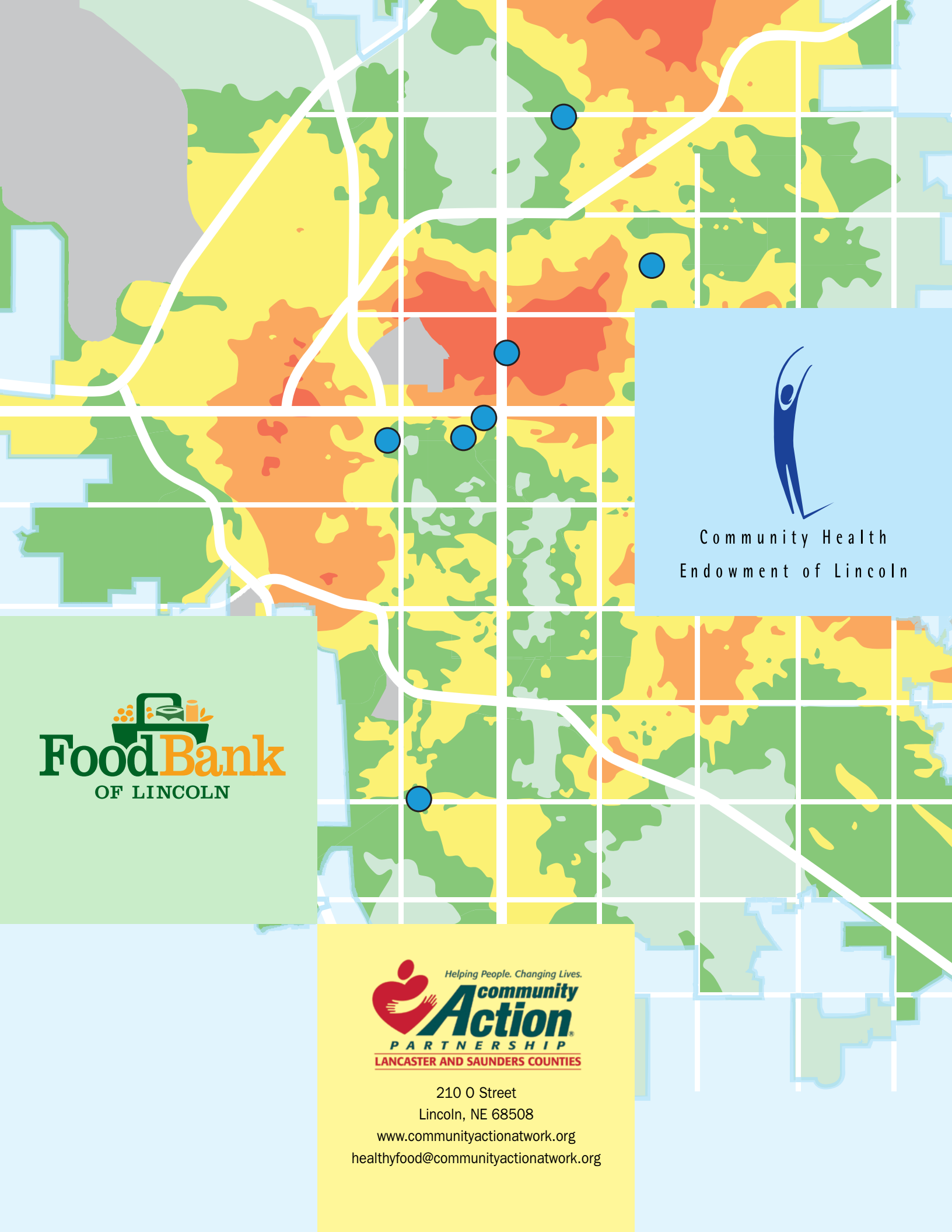
Currently, there are limited opportunities for local and regional food business enterprises to start and expand, as kitchen incubator space is not readily available in Lincoln. Few commercial kitchens are available for rent and they are limited in hours and equipment. Churches have kitchens, but often don't have appropriate equipment, storage, or consistent availability. Recipe Box, Inc. is exploring establishing a kitchen incubator, a place for current and emerging entrepreneurs to launch, grow, market, and scale food and beverage related businesses. Prospective entrepreneurs can bring their concept, receive startup mentoring, develop a viable product, launch their business, and grow production. The kitchen incubator will provide the infrastructure and services for each of these stages in company development. Preliminary funding through the USDA has been received by Recipe Box in collaboration with Community Crops to conduct a needs assessment and business plan for the development of a kitchen incubator. As part of this preliminary work, Recipe Box is seeking additional funding sources and project partners.

Conclusion

Ensuring that everyone has access to healthy food is the single most important and perhaps simplest thing we can do to support the overall health and well-being of our community. In recent years, this access has continued to improve. An increased number of grocery store options, introduction of the Lincoln Fresh truck, and higher quality meals served to Lincoln's children, for example, have all contributed to this progress.

This progress makes Lincoln more poised than ever to continue to build upon successes and positively impact the health of citizens. Everyone – from individual citizens to service providers – has an opportunity to make a difference. Parents and caregivers can express their desire for healthier food options to their children's schools. Service providers can incorporate nutrition education into their existing work with the populations they serve. And we can all advocate for legislation that supports greater healthy food access by contacting our elected officials.

Making Lincoln the healthiest city in the nation is achievable, but it will take the contributions of all of us. For more information about how to get involved in the healthy food access movement, visit www.communityactionatwork.org.



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