



## **FROM FOOD DESERTS TO FOOD EQUITY** *A Broader Framework*

by

### **Food Deserts Immersion Team 2020**

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### **Introduction**

The 2020 Leadership Metro Richmond immersion group assigned to study food deserts in greater Richmond quickly learned that a lot more than geography affects citizens' access to fresh and nutritious foods. While a casual observer may think this problem is not being actively addressed in our region, our research showed that many nonprofits, businesses, and citizen activists are working to address numerous challenges related to equitable food access.

### **Our Journey**

Our immersion project began from the perspective that food deserts are geographic areas that lack access to fresh, nutritious food due to a lack of stores or retailers to provide these items. We therefore started our interviews with professionals working to grow food to be sold or donated in underserved urban areas. These conversations opened the door to a broader perspective that once food reaches underserved neighborhoods, challenges remain related to affordability, transportation, having adequate time and child care to go shopping, and personal preferences or familiarity with available foods. Our later interviews delved into these secondary issues and what is currently being done to address them.

### **Findings**

Issues related to food equity include: poverty, housing instability, transportation, distribution, time scarcity, cultural nuances, and education. Each of these issues on its own presents a complex and difficult obstacle, but when it comes to food inequity, the compounding impact of all of these issues can at times seem insurmountable. How can families eat fresh foods throughout the month if they are supported by public assistance funding distributed once or twice a month? How can residents obtain adequate groceries if they do not own a personal vehicle and are limited to what they can carry on a bus or on foot? How can exhausted, impoverished parents be incentivized to cook

fresh foods rather than serving heavily processed convenience foods? And all of these issues are intertwined with cultural nuances and the need for sensitivity.

There are numerous groups and individuals in the Richmond region working to address each of these challenges. Nonprofits such as Shalom Farms, Tricycle Gardens, and Lewis Ginter Botanical Gardens are all growing food for the purpose of distribution to underserved neighborhoods. Shalom Farms operates mobile markets and provides refrigerators and fresh produce to corner stores. Tricycle Gardens was likewise providing produce to local stores prior to their merger with Enrichmond. The Market at 25<sup>th</sup> allows matching of SNAP benefits for fruits and vegetables and also has a reduced-cost transportation program to allow residents to access the market. They expanded their SNAP benefit to include frozen fruits and vegetables after realizing that shoppers could not sustain fresh produce for an entire month. Fit4Kids, Lewis Ginter, and Healthy Heart Plus are among groups providing educational programs around growing and preparing fresh and nutritious foods. Fit4Kids effectively provides programming at schools throughout the region in order to expose children to various fruits and vegetables early and to help them to develop a broader palate.

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed both the fragility and importance of the work being done around food equity. Duron Chavis was furloughed from Lewis Ginter Botanical Gardens and continues his work to build Resilience Gardens throughout the area. Tricycle Gardens became financially unsustainable and was absorbed by the Enrichmond Foundation (though not a direct result of COVID-19). As public schools closed, educational food programs were forced to move online, a medium that does not ensure access for underserved communities. Richmond Public Schools quickly developed plans to provide food to students who typically received several meals a day at their schools. Transportation options decreased as bus routes were reduced and ridesharing options became risky. The inability for SNAP beneficiaries to utilize online grocery shopping services came into sharp focus, with many states working to quickly change regulations around this.

One of our most enlightening interviews was with Sparkle, a single mother living in Gilpin Court. Sparkle's experience trying to provide adequate nutrition to her family involved all the issues uncovered in our research: lack of affordability, limited access to transportation, and gaps in programs that have previously attempted to educate residents of food deserts about how to cook. Our time with Sparkle also identified which community programs can be most effective in addressing these issues, including Shalom Farms' mobile markets, The Market at 25<sup>th</sup>'s SNAP benefit matching and reduced-cost transportation assistance, and Fit4Kids' educational programming delivered in schools to encourage health and wellness in our youth.

## Recommendations

We identified several potential short and long-term solutions, including lobbying to add Virginia to the list of states that allow SNAP benefits to be used for online grocery shopping, finding a way to fill the three-month gap left when Shalom Farms' mobile markets are out of service, and increasing the minimum wage. These are just a few of the ideas generated from our interviews and discussions.

For those interested in further research, maps identifying food deserts in the city of Richmond closely align with historic maps of redlined neighborhoods, demonstrating the connection between generational poverty and reduced access to food. Local publications have published numerous articles about the challenges and successes of The Market at 25<sup>th</sup>. The 2013 report of the Richmond Food Policy Task Force was another great resource.

## Interviews

- Duron Chavis, *former Community Engagement Coordinator at Lewis Ginter Botanical Gardens*
- Sally Schwitters, *former Executive Director at Tricycle Gardens*
- Dominic Barrett, *Executive Director at Shalom Farms*
- Ivy and Victoria, *Neighborhood Coordinators for the Food Justice Alliance*
- Brit Nelson, *Richmond City Health District*
- Sparkle, *Gilpin Court resident*
- Norm Gold, *General Manager at the Market at 25<sup>th</sup>*
- Mary Dunn Stuart, *Executive Director at Fit 4 Kids*
- Alice Freeman, *Founder of Healthy Heart Plus*