**A Desert in the Swamp: The Need for a Community Based Food Access Solution in Gainesville**

USDA Food Planning Grant Narrative

**A Community Food Conversation**

In an effort to bring together community stakeholders, the City of Gainesville hosted a conversation where feedback, input, and opinions from members of the community were taken and recorded on the topic of food access in the city. While the conversation was broad and reflected a wide range of issues, the central theme focused on the desire to see a community focused approach to food needs. One commissioner stated " we have no lack of ideas, resources, skills, and committed residents when it comes to our food. What we do lack is organization and resources to address the systematic issues in front of us."

*The Last Grocery Store*

One of the key items listed in the forum, and one that has been echoed through many other public forums, is the lack of grocery access on the East part of Gainesville. The last grocery store in East Gainesville, Sav-a-Lot, closed its doors more than two years ago. Before the Sav-a-A lot left town, Food Lion closed its doors leaving a fully equipped retail grocery store front located just next to the health department vacant. Along SR20 which passes through the main part of East Gainesville, there are large signs listing how ready the space is for a tenant and that the space is still available for lease.

As a small southern city, Gainesville has a long history of racial segregation. The West part of Gainesville with close access to the university has historically been the white side of town, while East Gainesville on the other side of Main has been the home for generations of black families. A history of redlining, Jim Crow, and unfair mortgage practices kept many upwardly mobile black families restricted to East Gainesville for housing. While these legal restrictions have long been abandoned, the informal segregation is still heavily present. East Gainesville is still majority African-American.

  The neighborhoods in East Gainesville are cohesive and reflect a long history of place and identity. Duval has many parks, churches, and schools that have been in existence for generations. The neighborhoods are comprised of small single family homes with lush green yards and tree lined streets. Many families are homeowners or have inherited the homes from their parents. The streets are largely safe and the families that reside there strong and active members of the Gainesville community.

However, there is no grocery store. There is no urgent care clinic. For those that go on morning coffee runs, they drive 20 miles to find a Dunkin or a Starbucks. Most residents get their groceries from the Dollar General next to the old Food Lion or the corner store that primarily sells liquor and cigarettes. While many residents can drive the 5 miles to the Publix on Main Street, many residents who use the bus or ride their bike are not able to access this easily.

 Racial Inequity.

**Racial Inequity in Gainesville**

In 2017, a group consisting of the City of Gainesville, Alachua County, Santa Fe College, UF Health, Alachua County School District, and the Chamber of Commerce commissioned a report designed to document the presence of racial inequality in Alachua County. The report focused on both quantitative and qualitative data and focused on many areas of community life where the presence of racial inequities is well documented. In each of these areas, the published report compared the disparities Blacks and Latinos from whites as well as comparing to the state averages. Unsurprisingly, the report documented clear disparities in the area of education, health care, economics, housing, and transportation. What was surprising, was the extent of which the city is more disparate than the rest of the state of Florida.

*Health Disparities*

  One of the key areas of the report was focused on health care. While UF provides world class access to medical care through UF Shands, the rate of diabetes deaths for African Americans is 50% higher than that of whites in Alachua County. Similarly, when this is investigated further, the rate of diabetes related hospitalizations is twice the rate for whites and significantly above the state average. In fact, Alachua county has the second highest rate of diabetes hospitalization rate for African Americans out of all 67 counties in the state of Florida.

The issue that presented the highest disparity among Caucasians and African-Americans in Alachua Co. Were total deaths related to diabetes. In 2014, African Americans had a cause-specific mortality rate of 40 per 100,000, compared to 30.4 per 100,000 for Caucasians. This mortality rate for African-Americans in Alachua Co. is also above the state rate of 32.10 and national rate of 30.3. This piece of information by itself is a prime example to investigate and plan an intervention, since diabetes is a treatable disease and deaths related to diabetes complications can be prevented more easily than other chronic diseases.

Of similar significance is Alachua County with the second highest physician rate surpassed only by Santa Rosa County. The rate is also significantly higher than the other 67 counties and more than two standard deviations from the median. Alachua County also has the highest hospital bed rate but within one standard deviation from the median on health Department workers and EMT/Paramedics. With this abundance of health providers, Alachua County has the third highest diabetes hospitalization disparity ratio that also sits two standard deviations away from the median. Demographically, Alachua County has a higher than state average black population (20.6 and 16.6 respectively) and a long history of segregation in the county. In relation to the rest of the data, Alachua County contributes significantly to the association between physician rate and diabetes hospitalization ratio. This relationship may indicate that the high amount of health care facilities may not be accessible in the county by Black residents.

*Business Development and Income*

One of the startling items to come out of the report was the levels of income and wealth between white and black families in the area and how they related to the state average. While white households had a median net worth of over $300,000, black households were left with around 10% of that value at $30,000. This indicates a clear disparity in the area of access to capital, investments, businesses, and home ownership. In conjunction with the disparities in business ownership, education, and transportation this value shows a clear need for business growth for black families in East Gainesville. Years of disinvestment have led to a large gap in access to capital.

**The University Town**

For much of Gainesville's history, the University has played an outsize role in the development and focus of the city. When the University of Florida was receiving bids for home cities, Gainesville offered free access to city water in exchange for moving into town. The city then was not much more than a cow-town or a middle stop between Jacksonville and Cedar Key. The city grew substantially with the university.

While the University provides world class access to resources, researchers, academics, and some of the best and brightest students in the nation, it does not always have a positive effect on the long time residents of the city. Due to the presence of higher education, most individuals applying for jobs have a college education or more leaving those with a high school degree with the least desirable forms of employment. While the city has one of the better bus systems in the southeast for a city its size, the routes almost exclusively focus around campus. Those who are trying to get elsewhere have longer wait times and less availability. Due to Florida law, all publicly owned land is untaxable by municipalities leaving the large sprawling UF campus in the heart of the city center off limits for city revenue. While the city has one of the highest quality municipal owned and operated utilities in the state, the campus is exempt from its use and partners with a regional investor owned company for its own power needs.

While UF is known as a world class research institution, the presence of so many concentrated researchers can create a laboratory like feel for the local residents. Many well intended, grant funded community based programs designed to show an evidence base for improved equity normally do not last longer than the amount of time the grant has been allotted. While the influx of students and professors who buy and sell, the presence of so many young individuals with outside support has driven the housing market out of reach for many families that rely on the local economy. The short term nature of most academic positions that benefit the careers of those that are willing to relocate at important points in their career makes it difficult for many to form long lasting relationships with the community. While the presence of UF brings access to many unique, positive, and valuable resources, it has provided little long term support for many East Gainesville residents who are not connected to or involved in the University. Many people (and particularly people of color) have historically felt excluded by the university and left behind as the town has almost exclusively focused on the needs of students.

**The Move Towards Equity**

This level of disparity and separation has historically led to the formation of clear and district silos: individual realities where institutions act independently of each other and do not cross paths or work towards each other's interest. While many players would like to see an improved community and share many specific goals, the institutional framework has discouraged collaboration. These silos have led to decreased health for many that rely on these institutions.

However, these silos are starting to break down. Alachua County is taking ownership of the need to work together to improve community health through taking advantage of the many resources that we have available. There is a strong recognition that one group, institution, or political entity does not have the ability to do this themselves nor does one group get to control the agenda. Instead, the members and leaders of our community are collaborating in innovative ways to solve problems for the better of us all. Developing initiatives that specifically address multiple layers of our culture simultaneously like transportation and housing, criminal justice and education, or health and food, Alachua County is building a collaborative health model that seeks to improve health for everyone.

*Gainesville 4 All*

As a collaboration between the Gainesville Sun and the Community Foundation of North Central Florida, Gainesville for All is a unique and powerful grassroots approach to addressing racial and economic inequities that hurt people and hinder our community from achieving its best potential. GNV4ALL accomplishes this in ways that bridge the many areas of public institutions and provides a place for stakeholders of any kind to engage and collaborate together towards meeting shared goals.

When GNV4ALL started meeting, they focused on gathering information and feedback on ends related to specific policy areas: families and jobs, education, housing and transportation, criminal justice, and health. Over the course of a few years, the teams were able to provide clear and comprehensive policy recommendations for institutions to use and follow to help meet the needs of the community. Many of these areas have been given specific attention, shown improvement, and have created better lives for those in the community. This has included helping pass a local Tobacco 21 law, changing Gainesville Police Department policy to issue citations instead of arrests for youth as a first action, and the creation of a last mile transportation service that connects East Gainesville residents that don't live close enough to a bus route with the downtown bus station.

Currently, GNV4ALL is in Phase III. This Phase is focused on creating the Gainesville Empowerment Zone; a defined area in East Gainesville where policy, programmatic, and economic development should be focused in order to have the greatest impact on improving health in our community.

*Working Food*

Working Food is a multi-faceted non-profit in the City of Gainesville that brings together entities from many institutions to work collaboratively on addressing issues related to food, health, and work.. This organization is designed to increase food literacy and security by making connections between local food access, food-related skills, and better health; promote cultural, ecological, and economic diversity and justice; expanding and strengthening the local food economy by creating links between local farmers and our community; and creating a mechanism for local investment in good food and local businesses in order that we may have a healthier and more equitable food system.

Working Food houses a culinary incubator where new food based startups are given resources, support, and opportunities for growth in order to help sustain and build a robust food based economy in the city. The vision for the facility and staff is help entre­pre­neurs become economically self-sufficient and con­tribute to a vibrant local food economy by doing what they love to do.

Working Food also hosts the Grow/Hub Farm to School to Work and collaborates with the Alachua County School Board’s Farm to School to Work program to provide hands-on garden training for students. This vocational training program for high school students with special needs provides training through the lens of food services and agriculture, while producing food for the school lunch program. Grow Hub, a new non-profit spin-off of farm to school, provides employment opportunities for adults that age out of the Farm to School to Work program. In both of these programs they work alongside both students and other young adults in both programs to tend our seed gardens, and to package and clean seeds for our collective.

Finally, Working Food hosts the After School Science Club Gardens where they work with the Cultural Arts Coalition to provide hands-on learning in a weekly afterschool garden program. This program is designed to re-enforce science, engineering, technology, math, and cultural concepts through the lens of gardening, and to inspire children to learn how to grow, prepare, and eat healthy food from their own gardens.

*A Community Based Solutions*

In partnership with Gainesville 4 All and The Duval Neighborhood association, and the City of Gainesville Working Food will be helping develop a program for utilizing existing food retailers to increase access for healthy food options in East Gainesville. Much of the focus in previous studies, programs, and grants has been on programs developed by the University to address food or health related issues that do not translate into long term sustainable changes for the community. The role that Working Food seeks to play is as program that engages with existing community capacity to equip long time residents to address these issues inside existing infrastructure for food delivery. Specifically, the goal of this program is to develop a process of working with existing corner stores, liquor stores, gas stations, and quick markets to integrate healthy food retail into their existing business and expand access to food that traditionally can only be found in grocery stores or health food stores. This process would involve a few key stages:

1. Engage with grassroots organizations to determine the community needs and desires for food retail.
2. Recruit volunteers from the community to conduct environmental scans on existing retailers to determine the status of food delivery in the area
3. Use these volunteers to engage retailers in qualitative surveys to determine their own needs and understanding of food insecurity in the area
4. Using the data collected from above sources, identify a list of foods that would be most wanted and needed by the community as well as 3-5 retailers that would be good candidates for a development program
5. Construct a program for enhancing the retailer’s business through a partnership with Working Food to improve the store appearance, quality, business process, in exchange for a commitment to carry and promote the identified healthy food access products
6. Recruit 2-3 participants to pilot the food retailer improvement project.

The design of this program is to consistently keep the focus on what the community actively asks for and how the community wants it to be delivered. Similarly, this program will focus less on creating its own program for delivery of resources but instead improve the existing infrastructure in order to jump start sustained economic investment and development after the improvements are made. The long term goal is an improved food delivery system as well as a better economic environment for East Gainesville residents to take advantage of in the long term.

A community based, City led initiative to equip existing food outlets, partner with neighborhood associations, work with embedded community stakeholders for the benefit of long time residents is necessary to create long term solutions. This project seeks to become that kind of development initiative.