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Introduction

Larimer County has typically received attention for positive attributes – recognition for various ‘best place to live, retire, etc.’ awards, reports of high educational achievement among its residents, and the natural beauty of the national, state and local parks within County boundaries. While it is difficult to picture, these factors coincide with a grimmer situation: residents who are challenged to provide their next meal on a daily basis. Food insecurity has become more evident locally as the recent economic downturn has impacted some resident’s ability to meet one of their most basic needs.

Food Insecurity in Colorado Households

Food Insecurity refers to the lack of access to enough food to fully meet basic needs at all times due to lack of financial resources.¹ **Food security** is access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life. At a minimum, this includes the ready availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods and the assured ability to acquire personally acceptable foods in a socially acceptable way. Just prior to the current economic downturn, 11% of all Colorado households were found to be ‘Food Insecure’². While measures of food insecurity specific to the last quarter of 2008 and the initial quarter of 2009 are not available, there are other markers that reflect the status of local food supplies.

Local Food Program Status

Several programs in Larimer County, through the government and a local non-profit, help residents by contributing to an adequate food supply. In general, all food programs are reporting a recent upsurge in client applications and assistance, corresponding to the trend of a downward spiral in the national and local economies. One of the best known, the [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program](#) (formerly known as the Food Stamp Program) experienced a significant increase in the number of food stamp applications (62%) in the last half of 2008. Expedited food stamp applications are considered an indicator of the number of people who have lost jobs in the prior month, as they are issued when households are in danger of missing utility and/or mortgage or rent payments. In January 2009, the number of expedited food stamp applications was 91%

¹ United States Department of Agriculture, http://www.frac.org/html/hunger_in_the_us/hunger_index.html
http://www.frac.org/html/hunger_in_the_us/hunger_index.html

² Colorado: State of the States 2008, Food Research & Action Center, www.frac.org

higher (554 applications) than in January 2008. There was also a 34% increase in the number of regular applications for food stamps during that month alone.

Similarly, the [Food Bank for Larimer County](#), our local food distribution agency, has experienced a steady increase in demand for their resources since July 2008 (the beginning of the 2008-09 fiscal year). From July to November 2008, the number of individuals using the Food Share pantries increased 21%. Between September 1, 2008 and November 30, 2008, the Food Bank for Larimer County registered 604 new families. An additional program that provides meals served to low-income children, the Kids Café, has had a 48% increase in the number of meals served during the last two years.³

An additional marker for food insecurity among children is the number of Larimer County students who are enrolled in the [School Reduced/Free Lunch Program](#). Children from families with incomes at or below 130 % of the poverty level are eligible for free meals, while those with incomes between 130 % and 185 % qualify for reduced-price meals. During the school years from fall 2005 to fall 2008, approximately a quarter of all children were enrolled in the program, which indicates a consistent need for food assistance. The latest information available, from the 2008 school year, is that 26% of school children were enrolled, up from 24% the previous year. More recently, in February 2009, that number increased to 27.6%.⁴

Alternative Food Supplies

One old answer to the issues of food insecurity and food supply safety has found new life in the resurrection of the home garden and the ‘Buy Local’ movement. There is a growing push to use space within urban and suburban yards and landscapes to produce locally grown, less costly produce, to supplement purchased food. One version of this is the creation of community gardens, some of which are specifically aimed at providing opportunities for low-income residents to learn and participate in growing their own food.

Many urban areas in other parts of Colorado, such as Denver and Boulder, have established community growing plots that revitalize the area, while at the same time providing healthy food to low-income neighborhoods. Within Larimer County, [The Gardens on Spring Creek](#) (The Gardens) in Fort Collins, is one of several available vegetable gardening plots that are consistently rented to capacity. Michelle Provaznik, Horticulture Facilities and Services Administrator for the City of Fort Collins, attributes at least some of the popularity of the plots to the tightening of family budgets.

The Gardens newest project, The Garden of Eatin’, will supply fresh produce to the Food Bank for Larimer County (mentioned above), while at the same time providing growing and preserving education to a new generation of home gardeners. Provaznik estimates The Gardens will provide 1,000 pounds of fresh food for donation, depending on the season’s growing conditions. In addition to providing food directly, The Gardens will house an ‘Outdoor Kitchen’ that will be used to teach cooking and healthy diet classes to encourage low-income families to include the available produce in their diet.

With the assistance of a Poudre Health Foundation grant, the project will be hiring a half-time Community Outreach staff position to oversee The Garden of Eatin’ and provide outreach assistance aimed at developing community gardens around Fort Collins. Sarah Morales of

³ Compass of Larimer County, http://www.larimer.org/compass/foodbank_ec_ind.htm

⁴ Coloradoan, March 8, 2009, Hallie Woods, “Schools see slight rise in free, reduced lunches”

Coalition for Activity and Nutrition to Defeat Obesity (CanDo) had a successful experience with last year's inaugural year of community gardening in Fort Collins' Coachlight Plaza low-income housing community. According to her, "...through the input of technical expertise, and several community donations, a dead patch of grass was converted to a viable community garden for residents of this low-income housing community."

Ms. Morales believes that the garden played a very direct role in improving the food security of low-income residents. At the end of the growing season, she asked participants about the impact of the garden on their individual/family food security and nutritional status. According to her, these families reported they had increased access to vegetables and were eating more vegetables than prior to participation. Ms. Morales reports several goals for the next gardening season, in addition to the creation of the community outreach position. The project will collaborate with Neighbor to Neighbor and the Fort Collins Housing Authority and residents of low-income communities to coordinate and develop residential and neighborhood-based community gardens, which will serve low-income residents. They plan to expand the existing garden at Coachlight Plaza, and use it as a model for other sites. Additionally, the project will provide training and gardening workshops to low-income communities, engage community volunteers, and coordinate donations of garden supplies.

The following is a partial list of Colorado community gardening projects and resources:

- [Colorado Local Sustainability](#)
- [Denver Urban Gardens](#)
- **Garden of Eatin'** – [Michelle Provaznik](#), Horticulture Facilities and Services Administrator, phone: (970) 221-6881
- [Growing Gardens](#): Boulder Community Food Project
- [Loveland Youth Gardeners](#)

Conclusion

The very recent and dramatic increase in residents needing assistance with food resources is a clear indication that more households in our community are suffering the consequences of the economy's downturn. This most basic item is one of the last to be cut or reduced from the household budget, meaning that families seeking agency food resources are experiencing more than moderate economic hardship. While several programs are funded through federal allocations, other local food programs rely heavily on local support. The Food Bank for Larimer County is a service which meets the immediate need for food. Likewise, community gardening programs that target low-income residents have the potential to make a long lasting difference in a household's food supply. Both types of programs complement each other, and based on recent measures of need, both could benefit from additional resources to support their missions.

Food Resources

- [Food Bank for Larimer County](#)
- Larimer County Department of Human Service, [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program](#), also known as the Food Stamp Program
- [National School Lunch Program](#)