

## LEAD Athens – Envision Athens Fresh Food Access and Sustainability

TO: LEAD Athens Steering Committee; Erin Barger, Envision Athens Project Manager  
FROM: LEAD Athens Dynamic Demo Group – Clay Durham, Leslie Hale, Julie Paulk, & Sam Perry  
DATE: February 15, 2019  
Re: Athens fresh food access – East Athens and beyond

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

With food access and nutrition serving as a critical link between early life and later outcomes – in health, education, and economic security generally – food security and fresh food access are among the most pressing issues facing low-income communities.

The poverty rate in Athens stubbornly remains at 26.6 percent after many decades of focus, with government and social service agencies stepping up to serve the most basic needs of the at-risk populations that fall into this broader group. The United Way of Northeast Georgia 211 referral program reports that the single most common inquiry to the combined phone and online system is food access (Mark Madison, United Way Director of Community Impact, Jan. 9, 2019 meeting). Research from the past decade into the impacts of SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) and WIC (Women, Infants, and Children) finds that participants benefit from better health outcomes and lower healthcare costs (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2018). However, the rates of use for both programs in Athens are below state and federal averages (UGA College of Public Health, 2018; Dr. Grace Bagwell Adams, Feb. 12 and Feb. 19, 2019 phone calls).

### BACKGROUND

When fresh food access in Athens – in particular on the East Side of Athens – was named one of 14 priority action items in the county’s strategic plan, it was pulling from a comprehensive and broad overview of community needs conducted over a multi-year period. The Action Agenda synthesized input from more than 1,600 participants and 8,600 comments and ideas. The priority action item embraced by this project: Establish an Eastside Farmers’ Market – to support agriculture as an extension of economic development, eco-tourism, beautification projects, and more. That goal was later broadened to be more inclusive of a broader range of community members and potential solutions, and rephrased as a goal to “establish a consistent and sustainable venue for fresh food” on Athens’ East Side.

Starting in August 2018, our team of four identified this priority item as the area of focus for our project. We embarked on the project with a desire to help craft possible solutions – but first wanted to better understand the need. We started by attending meetings with stakeholders – and hearing about the successes and shortcomings of past efforts. Through that process, our team determined that there were many groups and stakeholders working to address this need who have both expertise and passion – and that there were more questions than answers about the scope and depth of the “problem.” Our initial hope was to act as a connector between some of the many groups working to address food access in Athens. However, as Erin Barger, Envision Athens project manager, convened meetings that got these many partners communicating effectively together, we adjusted our focus to help ask – and answer – some of the lingering questions about how to define the need and what should be done to address it:

- (1) To what extent do low-income individuals feel that they lack access to the fresh fruits and vegetables they want?
- (2) What are the barriers to fresh food access and consumption among these individuals?

## DEFINING THE NEED

Individuals who lack consistent access to food at some point during the year spend an average of 45 percent more on medical care – \$6,100 – than people in food-secure households – \$4,200. Likewise, research has found links between food insecurity and chronic health conditions across all age groups (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2018). Previous research, plus unique data analysis conducted in conjunction with this project using Census and Athens Wellbeing Project Data, reveal that both WIC and SNAP are under-utilized in Clarke County. The fact that these two federally-funded food security programs are not being used by low-income Athens residents has profound implications for the health of the county - in a literal, people-centered sense and in a figurative, economic sense.

Previously reported analysis found that WIC (Women, Infants and Children), is significantly underutilized in Athens. According to an analysis conducted by students from the UGA College of Public Health, under Dr. Grace Bagwell Adams, conservative estimates place WIC utilization in Clarke County at about 32 percent of eligible families with children under five years of age. That is compared with the state average of 58 percent utilization, and the national average of 62 percent (USDA, 2015). WIC confers benefits by reducing the risk of pre-term births, meanwhile creating \$558 in direct benefits for every dollar's worth of WIC food vouchers (USDA, 2017). Based on that analysis, Bagwell Adams' students calculated that Athens-Clarke County forgoes \$3 million in WIC benefits per year – dollars that are federally available, cost nothing locally (aside from administrative time), and pump money into the local economy by way of spending at area grocery stores.

At our request, Dr. Bagwell Adams ran a similar analysis of SNAP utilization in Athens-Clarke County, cross-referencing data collected by the Athens Wellbeing Project and U.S. Census data. Her analysis is startling: just 67 percent of eligible residents in Athens are participating in SNAP, compared with 86 percent of eligible Georgians and 83 percent of eligible U.S. residents. What is more astounding is the lost benefit to Athens-Clarke County by the 6,000+ eligible households not participating: a combined annual benefit of \$17 million in federal nutrition assistance funding that is not being utilized by Athens residents (all figures provided by Dr. Bagwell Adams during a Feb. 19, 2019 phone call, with figures confirmed in a follow-up email). With an average monthly benefit of \$271 per household, these are dollars that could be offsetting other family expenses (such as daycare costs), they could be adding food - potentially more nutritious foods - to family pantries, and they would otherwise be funneled directly into the local economy and sales tax collections.

[1] Bagwell Adams indicated that both estimates are conservative, meaning that the lost local benefit may, in fact, be larger.

Further data collected by the Athens Wellbeing Project has correlated high rates of fast food consumption with low access to grocery stores, using school attendance zones as the geographic boundaries (Athens Wellbeing Project, 2018). Six of those school attendance zones (out of 16) lack a grocery store altogether. Meanwhile, a December 10, 2018 news wire article at OnlineAthens.com shared the results of a report by the Institute for Local Self-Reliance: Americans now buy more of their groceries at dollar stores – such as Dollar Tree and Dollar General – than they do at Whole Foods. This is significant because the food offerings at most of these stores are limited to processed and canned foods, with a few limited options for basics like bread, milk, and frozen vegetables. From the report: “In small towns and urban neighborhoods alike, dollar stores are leading full-service grocery stores to close. And their strategy of saturating communities with multiple outlets is making it impossible for new grocers and other local businesses to take root and grow.” As our survey data will show, access to grocery stores is critical.

Efforts to date at broadening fresh food access – and reducing food insecurity – in Athens include traditional food pantry programs, such as through the Food Bank of Northeast Georgia; soup kitchen models, as offered by Sparrow's Nest and Our Daily Bread; community gardens started and supported by various volunteer and nonprofit groups; and low-cost produce stands operated by Athens Land Trust (“Market on the Move”) and the UGarden, with support from agriculture students at Clarke County middle schools. Food pantry and soup kitchen programs continue to experience high demand and regular attendance, while efforts to create community gardens and farmer's market/produce stand opportunities for low-income families have experienced mixed success (Envision Athens ABUNDANCE meetings, Aug. 15, 2018; Jan. 17, 2019). The reasons for lack of participation by low-income individuals in community gardens and produce stands –

despite the ability to double SNAP benefits at many farmers' markets – is one area of much speculation. Because of these lingering questions, our group sought to better define the problem so that the existing stakeholders would be better prepared to effectively address the need.

## SCOPE OF SURVEY

Our survey was designed to be brief and informal. It was developed with advice and feedback from Dr. Katie Hein, a researcher in the UGA College of Public Health, and with some input from the attendees of one Envision ABUNDANCE (food access) meeting. In order to gather data and information from members of the East Athens community, our team set a goal of attending community gatherings targeted at low-income individuals (such as food pantries) and members of Section 8 and public housing communities. This was not a door-to-door survey, and the participants were not selected randomly. Furthermore, the individuals were all surveyed at events where meals or groceries were provided either at no cost or low cost, so these facets of our data collection should be taken into consideration when looking at the results. We gathered survey data from individuals at three types of events:

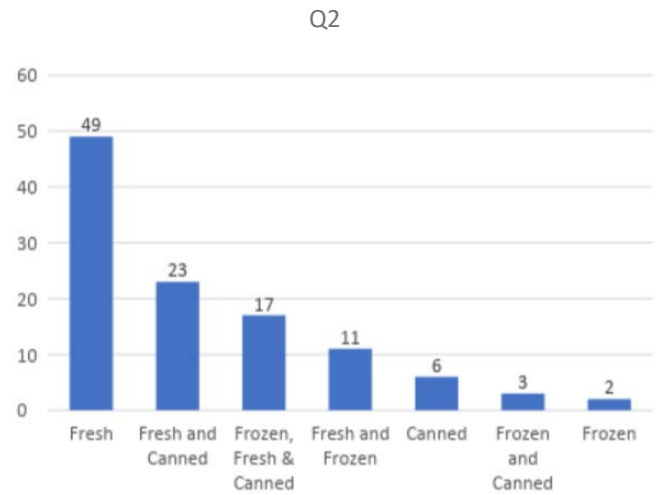
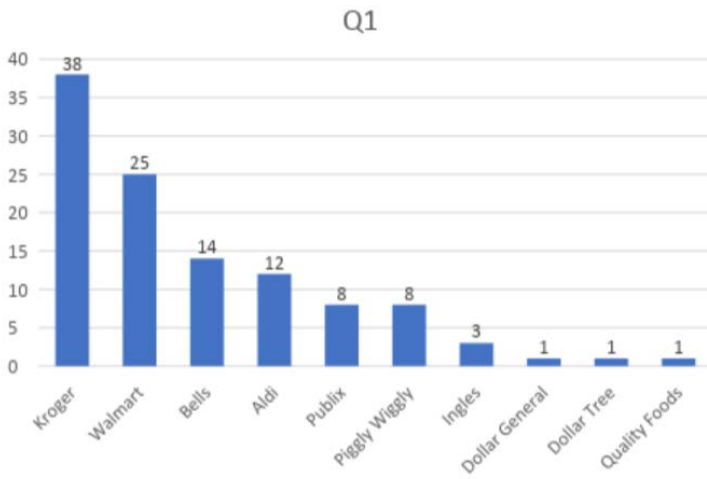
- Clarke County Police Department community cookout (one, at Pinewoods Mobile Home Park; one other opportunity in October was cancelled by the police department due to rain).
- Athens Land Trust Market on the Move mobile farm stands (three, in a variety of settings, including two assisted living facilities for elderly community members: Denny Towers and Athens Gardens).
- FEAST food distributions held at Covenant Presbyterian Church, on Barnett Shoals Road, a collaboration between four Athens congregations held monthly (two food distributions, both serving 75+ individuals).

All surveys were conducted verbally, by an interviewer with a clipboard asking questions and recording answers. In the Pinewoods Mobile Home Park, a Latinx community where Spanish is the sole language spoken by many adults, children of the survey respondents often served as translators. The survey consisted of six standard questions, with follow-up questions for interviewers to ask, only if the interview subject seemed comfortable sharing more information:

- Q1: Where do you currently buy your groceries?
  - Why this location? (Cost, convenience, proximity to home or work, etc.)
- Q2: When you buy produce, are you buying fresh, frozen, canned, or dried?
  - Why this kind/these kinds?
- Q3: How do you get to the store to purchase your groceries?
- Q4: What time of day do you normally shop for groceries?
  - Why that time?
- Q5: Are you able to purchase and prepare the fresh foods you want?
  - If not, why?
- Q6: How many people are you feeding on a daily basis?

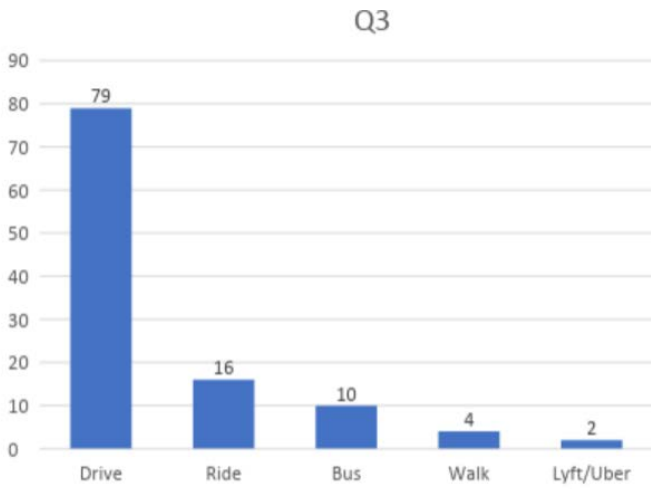
## FINDINGS

As shown in the charts that follow, individuals are buying their groceries from a range of places, with a strong plurality of survey respondents leaning toward Kroger as their preferred grocery store. Interestingly, very few respondents reported buying their groceries at dollar stores; this may be an artifact of where we conducted interviews – at mobile food pantries and produce stands, where people placed priority on fresh, whole foods for themselves and their families. When asked upon follow-up, respondents primarily indicated they **prioritized stores with the best prices and deals**. In some cases, respondents reported going to different stores on very specific days of the week or times of day because they knew when mark-downs or specials occurred. Some individuals shared that they went to these stores at 11 p.m. or early in the morning because of when prices are marked down. One notable observation made by our team is that respondents are making multiple trips per week – sometimes per day – to find the best deals. They will visit one store to buy their produce, and another to purchase meat, followed by attending a FEAST distribution the next Saturday. One Athens resident told us she drives to the Bell's Food Store in Crawford because the prices are lower there.

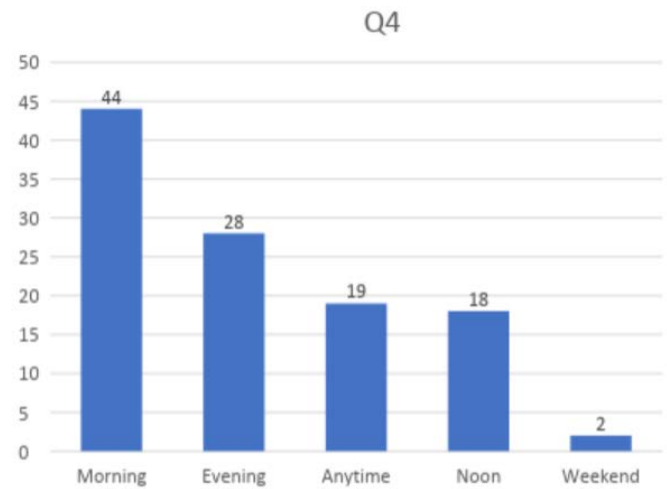


Responses to question two indicate that respondents are mostly **buying a mix of fresh, frozen, and canned produce**. Nearly half of our respondents – 44 percent – said they buy only fresh produce. Slightly more – 46 percent – reported purchasing a mix of fresh and canned, fresh and frozen, or all three. Only 11 respondents – out of 111 – report buying no fresh produce at all. Respondents who report buying fresh produce **expressed an awareness of the nutritional benefits of buying fresh versus canned or frozen**; those who buy more than one kind indicated that they often base their decisions on a **mix of price and convenience**.

The two above charts show how and when people are accessing groceries. This information may prove useful as community partners seek solutions – and structure the timing and location for delivering those solutions. Most individuals either drive their own car or ride with a friend or family member to shop for groceries. Meanwhile, the times when respondents shop for food tended to vary based on work schedules, when children are in school, when stores are less crowded, and when prices are marked down at their preferred store(s). There was **an overall preference toward morning** (40 percent of respondents) with the next highest answer being evening (25 percent) and nearly equal numbers (16 percent and 17 percent, respectively) preferring noon, or saying they would shop anytime.

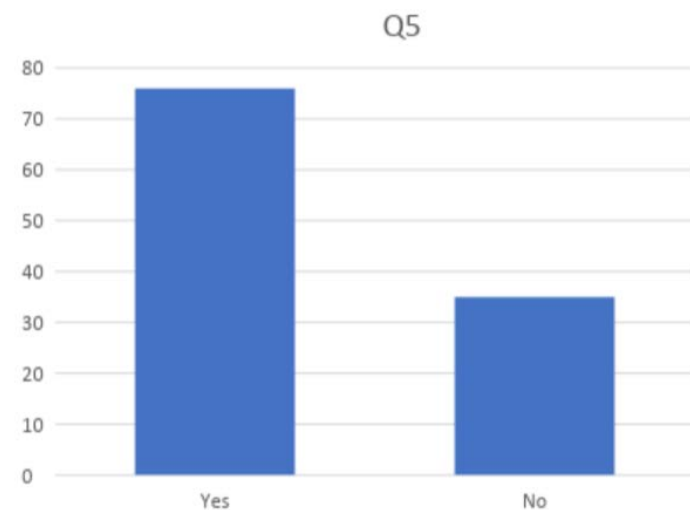


Transportation is a barrier for some individuals, who report



walking or even utilizing ride-sharing apps like Lyft and Uber to get their groceries – even adding other technologies like Kroger’s ClickList to ensure that their groceries are waiting for them when their Uber pulls up at the store.

The following chart illustrates what our team found most compelling: **68 percent of respondents indicate that they do have access to (and ability to prepare) the fresh fruits and vegetables they want to eat.** Those who answered “no” (and some who said “yes”) overwhelmingly indicated that they make trade-offs between fresh and canned or frozen – or they go without – because the produce they prefer is not in their budget or is otherwise out of season. This chart



indicates that the root of individuals’ access problem is not transportation or lack of nearby grocery stores – it is feeling priced out of the market for quality fresh fruits and vegetables. It is worth noting that the scope of this survey prevented us from going into detail about what, exactly, individuals are preparing – including the nutritive value of those foods. For example, if someone can – and does – purchase hearty greens, but prepares them with the addition of high-fat animal products (such as bacon or lard) the health benefits of eating those greens are reduced.

One additional piece of information that found our group – without us looking for it – relates to the food assistance programs discussed in previous sections. One individual interviewed as part of this project – a parent who has

previously been on both WIC and SNAP – indicated that she gave up on registering for means-tested benefits because of the difficulty in doing so. Anecdotal information about long waits at the Department of Children & Family Services have revealed that registrants can spend the equivalent of a 5- to 6-hour work shift waiting and going through the process of completing registration (and re-qualification) for SNAP benefits. This difficulty has been discussed previously in connection with the Athens Wellbeing Project Data demonstrating the underutilization of WIC And SNAP; however, our surveys and interviews about this subject reveal that this is a problem that deserves more study in Athens particularly.

“I was on SNAP, and I’m not anymore,” said Deitra, an Athens resident who was waiting for her turn to go through the line at a FEAST food distribution. Giving us permission to use her first name, Deitra told us that the parking lot at the Department of Family and Children Services on North Avenue is so full first thing in the morning that “it looks like a night club.” People swarm inside as soon as the doors open, and the wait times tend to be anywhere from 5 hours on a good day to 7 or 8 hours spent at the facility – often with children in tow – to register for benefits. “I think if the city don’t deal with some of these issues, they’re going to have a monster on their hands,” Deitra says, predicting that churches and other social service agencies will be overwhelmed trying to fill the gaps.

Most arresting is information we learned upon further probing: individuals who have experience registering and re-applying for SNAP in *other Georgia counties* report that **wait times are far lower in other counties**, compared with the Athens-Clarke DFCS office. One respondent who has registered for SNAP in both Athens and in Metro Atlanta said that she was generally in and out of a Fulton County DFCS office in under an hour. In Athens, she said, she knows people who have to request off from work to undertake this process. Other respondents report driving to counties that border Athens-Clarke to register, but this is a barrier for those with transportation issues. Deitra, for example, told us she would do that if she could afford the gas money.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Future efforts to make fresh fruits and vegetables available to low-income and at-risk populations in Athens should **focus on areas with fewer grocery stores**, and even consider partnering with African-American churches to reach residents in marginalized communities. Any efforts at providing foods should consider price as well as peoples' ability to access those opportunities outside of work and school schedules.
- As a policy solution, Athens-Clarke County may **consider zoning or other types of ordinances to curb the proliferation of dollar stores in low-income neighborhoods that lack a grocery store**. While respondents report being able to purchase and prepare the fresh foods they want, the correlation between fast food consumption and fresh food deserts is well-established. Similar ordinances have been used in other municipalities, according to Dr. Katie Hein, from the UGA College of Public Health. This solution would not necessarily have to freeze out a corporation like Dollar General entirely, but could prioritize the establishment of a *Dollar General Grocery* (which does sell fresh fruits and vegetables) over a traditional Dollar General.
- Many efforts are being undertaken – including by the two major hospitals based in Athens – to reach individuals for health screenings in their own communities. Some (including the collaboration between Piedmont Athens Regional and Athens Land Trust) are reaching individuals at soup kitchens. This strategy of **meeting people where they already are** is one that should be leveraged further. Areas where Athens Land Trust Mobile Market was best attended were those places where people were already gathering, such as the lobby of Denny Towers. Extending health screenings and other kinds of outreach in these areas – such as recruiting participants for the FARM Rx education program – would help reach more of the at-risk and in-need population. The participants we interviewed reported spending extensive time driving from one location to another in order to access services and assistance, including taking time off work to do so.
- Work with all partners to **ensure that existing programs and supports are registered with the local 211 system** through United Way of Northeast Georgia. The high rate of inquiries to this system about food assistance mean that the most complete information possible will benefit the most possible people.
- Because of the considerable wait times – and the time spent by families traveling to multiple locations to receive services – partnerships should be forged to allow **mobile registration for SNAP and WIC benefits**. One such point of service is the FEAST food distributions that take place every other month at Covenant Presbyterian Church on the East Side. Additionally, the white paper produced by students in the College of Public Health in 2018 recommends partnership between the Athens Department of Public Health and the Clarke County School District, as well as area pediatricians, to identify and register eligible families for WIC benefits. The same could be done for SNAP.
- **Education efforts should focus on older adults** – who value cooking with fresh foods – **and families with young children** – whose habits are more elastic, and who face a lifetime of potential benefits that come with good early nutrition. Some of the most consistent and enthusiastic participation in the Athens Land Trust mobile markets was among fixed-income older adults living in Denny Towers and Athens Gardens. Additionally, efforts at education should keep in mind that many individuals already feel that they have access to and the ability to prepare the fresh foods they want. Education efforts should focus on helping individuals make better-educated choices between frozen or canned vegetables, or how to make substitutions for their favorite vegetables when they are not in season or are not on sale.

## AREAS FOR ADDITIONAL STUDY

Admittedly, this survey was limited in time and scope. Our team gathered 111 completed surveys at three types of events, and the results are not necessarily a comprehensive review of low-income individuals or communities in East Athens. For that reason, we recognize that additional study may be needed.

- **The SNAP and WIC benefit systems in Athens need to be studied** to determine why participation is lower and why wait times in Clarke County are longer than other municipal areas. This may require work with the Athens legislative delegation, as well as the local offices of social service agencies.
- Two individuals interviewed indicated that they use technology to get around transportation-related barriers. It is worth exploring whether partnerships between agencies and grocery stores could be forged to **leverage ride-sharing and grocery ordering applications** to help those with transportation or mobility issues.
- There continues to be considerable interest in community gardens, to allow for the cultivation of fresh fruits and vegetables on the doorsteps of low-income individuals. However, scattered and anecdotal reports show that actual participation in community gardening tends to be limited to a small handful of individuals – sometimes without the buy-in needed for those gardens to thrive. More study or community survey may be needed to **assess the barriers to participation in community gardening projects**, or the resources needed to make them successful.
- There is an established program allowing individuals with SNAP to double their EBT purchases at participating farmers' markets. However, the rate of use remains low, indicating that there are ongoing barriers to utilization. Anecdotally, partners share the individuals still feel that prices are not attainable, even with the doubled benefits. Particularly for people participating in the FarmRx program – which focuses on education and exposure to farmers' markets – **strategies should be explored for how to make this program maximally accessible to low-income families.**

## CONCLUSION

As the novelist Jonathan Safran Foer wrote, “Food is not rational. Food is culture, habit, craving, and identity.” To unravel that further: the way we eat, how we get our food, the trade-offs we make about what to eat and when and how are entangled with where we come from, what is important to us, and what we see around us. As evidenced here, there are no simple solutions to this issue. Athens Wellbeing Project data has revealed that residents who don't have easy access to a grocery store are far more likely to consume fast food multiple nights a week. At the same time, our inquiries found that the population of residents identified as “in need” largely report that they have access to what they want and prefer. What is going on here?

As social scientists and nutritionists figured out more than two decades ago, if you put certain items - like fresh fruits and whole grains - at eye level in school cafeterias, the tiny mental “nudge” that occurs is enough to encourage better habits and behaviors. There are no one-step solutions offered here, but a series of recommendations for further lines of inquiry about how Athens-Clarke County can do more to put healthy options at eye level - and within better reach - for the most vulnerable residents.

Careful consideration by county leaders about where new grocery stores - and what types of grocery stores - locate, could strategically establish better fresh food access in places where it is needed. Continued collaboration by key partners to reach residents where they are - and among those who have demonstrated desire and motivation - could yield benefits of better participation in wellness screenings, education programs, and benefits registration. And finally: if we can make it easier to register for - and utilize - federal nutrition assistance benefits, our families will benefit exponentially through better health, improved maternal-fetal outcomes, and even improved academic performance for children. This has the power to reduce the burden on local medical systems and on everyday citizens who often share the costs of care for chronic conditions like obesity and heart disease. Meanwhile, the economic impact - of forgone SNAP and WIC benefits totaling a combined \$20 million annually - in our county cannot be understated. **Those dollars**

**are available at no extra cost to either the county nor the state government, and they equate to \$20 million worth of groceries on families' tables and food sold by local grocers.** With a current local sales tax rate of 8 percent, this represents \$1.5 million in lost tax revenues to Clarke County each year - no paltry amount in a county whose sales tax revenues have plateaued in recent years (Presentation by ACC Finance Director David Boyd, City Hall, Feb. 14, 2019).

There is much at stake, and still - so much more to be gained - by addressing these issues, which are at the root of so many other issues in our community. It starts with awareness of the scope and depth of the thorny problem of food access - and it ends with a region that is poised to do remarkable things when we can give our residents better access to one of the most basic building blocks of a healthy life.

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