



2014-2015 MPHA “Public Health Matters” Policy Forum Series



Zip Code Matters!

Zip Code Matters! Where we eat: May 8, 2015

Moderator: Donna Anderson, MPHA past president

Panelists:

Leah Driscoll, The Twin Cities Mobile Market, Wilder

Lisa Gemlo, Fruit and Vegetable Coordinator, MN Department of Health

Tracy Sides, Executive Director, Urban Oasis

Opening remarks by Kristen Godfrey Walters: This is the final forum in the Zip Code Matters series, and today we will discuss the relationship between zip code and food access. Reminder of upcoming MPHA Annual Meeting in Duluth on May 28-29.

Donna: Welcome and thank you to the Forum committee for designing such stimulating activities. There was a recent news headline about obese students in Sweden, saying they are less likely to finish school. Another study of teenagers that received medical treatment for obesity found that they are less likely to graduate from high school. Another recent article highlights a North Minneapolis organization working on access to food.

Opening Remarks:

Leah Driscoll- I work with the Twin cities mobile market, which is a Wilder program. We looked at zip codes with very little food access. Looking at this in the twin cities, there are chunks of food deserts in both Minneapolis and St. Paul. We tried to come up with a short-term effort as a first step to increasing food access. We bought former metro transit bus and converted it into grocery on wheels. We set a weekly schedule and come at the same time weekly. We serve 19 different locations each week in St. Paul. The grocery has stops in east side, Frogtown, north end, west side neighborhoods. We have a leverage St. Paul promise neighborhood initiative to increase fruit/veg consumption for children living in those neighborhoods. A goal is to close achievement gap. At the end of December we more than doubled the transactions we would have. Have served over 1400 individuals and 4300 transactions. We go to public housing sites, churches, schools, childcare centers, non-public low-income housing sites, and senior housing sites. We only wanted to do this if it was something the community wanted. We met with community leaders and conducted focus groups and asked if the mobile grocery was something they would want. We believe this is why there has been such a great community response. We only sell healthy foods such as fresh fruits, vegetables, meat, halal meat, dairy items, and basic dry goods. The goal is to make food as affordable as possible.

Lisa Gemlo: How many have heard of SHIP? How about the Minnesota food charter? 2 in 3 Minnesotans are overweight. 1 in 5 families with children are overweight. 1 in 6-7 live in a federally designated food desert. It's a challenge that will require new partners, new skillsets, and a realignment of resources. A school director in southeastern Minnesota said none of the students knew what a potato was. Creating a food charter for the state of Minnesota was our vision. We tried to take the food system from a broader perspective. We need folks in health to join those in agriculture, environment, loan officers, and council members. Each one of us holds a key and must take action. We all have a locus of control in the work we do. We need to make sure that all people have the access to achieve their full potential.

Tracy Sides- We started ~1 year ago and emerged from the idea that food is magic. It can bring people together across generations and cultures and it brings life to our bodies. Food can be a local economic driver. That's the vision behind Urban Oasis. Our strategic priorities: Expand markets for local underserved communities. We work with Latino farmers, Hmong American farmers, and the big river farm- immigrant farmer-training program in organic farming practices. We purchase food from underserved producers to inspire and nourish consumers. We believe in the importance of shaping the narrative of food in public and professional discourses. How do we sustain our organization? We've been grateful to have grants from USDA. We have the food insecurity and nutrition incentive, which is focused on increasing fruit/vegetable consumption among SNAP participants. Our first class was with African American/Latino women and it created great social connections and a desire to cook together after class ended. It was a 10-week program.

Leah- we definitely have to subsidize local fruit/vegetable farmers and producers of locally produced food. We must consider what are some smaller steps we can take to support people living in poverty? We have injustice about who has access to real food. Solutions need to come from the community. I hope we use an approach that works collaboratively with the community.

Panelist questions:

Several panelists have mentioned the concept of food as love. Food connects people. How do we bring communities together to focus on their priorities? How do we work across different cultural traditions? How do we build community/social connections across different groups?

Tracy- I mentioned community meals earlier. We bring in chefs from different food traditions to serve within their communities. Bring people together and have conversations. Let connections emerge naturally. In the east side of St. Paul there is rich cultural diversity.

Leah- I think it starts with authentic relationships with people in community. We work hard to hire people/volunteers from the communities we serve. These relationships open conversations about food/cooking/culture. This work comes after establishing a strong relationship base. Once people see that others are being authentic the other stuff comes easily. People like to hang out on our buses to build connections among customers.

Lisa- I believe that all food is cultural. So as a culture what systems have we created? I think of when a child comes to this country and then goes off to school. What is their experience around food? We need to view the issue from an institutional standpoint. What views have we established?

How do we motivate parents to make good food for their families? What are the income level people need to purchase affordable/healthy food?

Lisa- Affordability- in the food charter input the top considerations were affordability and income. It was clear that we needed to speak to a minimum wage increase. While we wrote the grant a minimum wage increase took place.

Leah- we need to change the environment we currently have for families and kids. Kids love the bus. They come in and pick out the food they want. This is nice for parents because they don't have to have the battle with kids about buying sweets. Changing the environment changes the interactions.

Tracy- a youth adult program paired with adult eating program. The experience piece is important.

How do we find work life balance to make healthy meals?

Lisa- we have to be that witness within our institutions for doing more with less.

Leah- unfortunately I think for many families the work/life balance isn't a question we can even ask for some people. Many are struggling with employment to begin with. We are remised to think about work/life balance if we can't get people to work in the first place.

What policies would you like to see change to help provide growers with ingredients/incentives for fresh/local foods? Working with big industry to change food practices? How to we increase the demand for fresh fruit/vegetables instead of process foods? When do we see commodity subsidies changing?

Tracy: incentivizing production of fresh local food. 2 ideas. One idea is the corn and soybean subsidies. When we look at those and the billions of dollars versus the subsidies for growing real food, there is a vast difference. When you step back and take a Health in all Policies approach this is ludicrous. We need to shift this inequitable balance. Locally, cities and institutions having incentivizing local procurement would be another suggestion.

Lisa: we are in the silicon valley of food in Minnesota. Nationally, we can change the consumer demand by changing the way we market to children. This plays a huge role in the choices we make. Issues farmers face is crop insurance and land access. It is not feasible for new farmers to buy land.

Leah: SHIP funding is currently under threat of being cut at the state legislature. We should contact legislators. The healthy eating here at home initiative bill gives state funding to sustain market bucks program. For every \$5 SNAP customers spend they get a voucher.

You're in an elevator with a legislator who doesn't support your work. What would you say in 1-2 minutes to that legislator?

Leah- tell stories about people

Lisa- stories are the most effective way to talk to legislators. The economic development possibility side tends to resonate.

Tracy- stories are compelling and important.

Each of you has a different model /approach relating to food systems. How can your approaches/models be replicated?

Tracy- our model of the urban oasis is about creating a microcosm or an alternative food system. Near Brainerd there is a food hub called Sprout that has a relationship with the health care system with food producers.

Leah- we definitely hope to expand to greater Minnesota with the caveat that its only if these communities want this. Maybe we should improve the supply chain for local struggling grocery stores. We don't want to step on any toes.

Lisa- a state food policy council needs to be established. We are in the silicon valley of food. We have an efficient food system in place.

Donna: We've learned a lot and connected and now it's our task to go forth and work together on this problem. MPHA has always been a catalyst on lots of social movements. Thank you to our panelists.

There is still time to register for the MPHA conference in Duluth from May 28-29. There will be one session on food systems. MPHA has signed on to a proclamation to promote mental health and wellbeing.