Food Security in West Tallahatchie County
*A Partnership between the University of Michigan and the Emmett Till Memorial Commission*

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**Executive Summary**
Access to fresh and healthy foods is essential to the wellbeing of individuals and their communities. In rural regions with less densely populated communities, finding ways to ensure access to fresh food - especially fruits and vegetables - can be challenging. Our project strives to enable a meaningful partnership with communities across West Tallahatchie, Mississippi to support community-driven work toward improving the region’s access to fresh fruits and vegetables, to contribute to local economic growth, and to improve the health of community members and their families.

Our team of five graduate students from the University of Michigan are partnering with the Emmett Till Memorial Commission (ETMC) to identify opportunities for increasing sustainable access to healthy foods in West Tallahatchie. By using a community-based participatory research\(^1\) approach our project will allow our team to work closely with community members and leaders as well as local business owners and nonprofit organizations enabling the development of initiatives for increasing healthy food access and overcoming barriers to implementation. Based on input collected from these stakeholders during in-person interviews and community workshops, potential strategies identified include: (1) establishing a mobile market, (2) expanding the existing farmer’s market, (3) creating a cooperative grocery store, (4) building a community garden, (5) developing farming assistance programs, and (6) supporting healthy corner store initiatives.

Having identified these community-driven solutions, our project will have two primary outcomes to facilitate the transition to the community and support long-term implementation of strategies for increasing food security in West Tallahatchie. First, the team will define and develop three food system scenarios in a 20-25 page professional report for our client, community stakeholders, and the Dow Fellows program. Each scenario will describe a future for West Tallahatchie under potential alternative food systems exploring key drivers for change, barriers to success, and offering best practice recommendations for implementation. Second, the team will return to Mississippi for a third trip in November 2016 to host a final community workshop. A defining goal has been to build capacity in the community for collaboration to continue taking steps toward increasing food security within West Tallahatchie. This workshop will focus on discussing our final report and key next steps including identifying a community group dedicated to spearheading this work and writing grants for funding.

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\(^1\) Rooted in participatory and action research, CBPR is a “partnership approach to research that equitably involves...community members, organizational representatives, and researchers in all aspects of the research process and in which all partners contribute expertise and share decision making and ownership” (Israel, Eng, Schulz & Parker, 2013).
Progress Report

Food security is crucial to the health of individuals and their communities. In 2014, 14% of Americans were food insecure, or lacked consistent access to enough food to ensure health. Mississippi is the country’s least food secure state, with 22% of households reporting a lack of reliable access to healthy food. The state also suffers from one of the highest unemployment rates nationwide. Several Mississippi grassroots and state-level initiatives are responding to the demonstrated need for improved food access by working to identify the primary barriers to food security.

In Mississippi’s West Tallahatchie County, stakeholders from a variety of backgrounds and organizations have observed an increase in food insecurity since the recession, when many local grocery stores went out of business. One of these institutions is the Emmett Till Memorial Commission (ETMC), a non-profit organization based in the town of Sumner that is dedicated to racial reconciliation. Located in Webb, Mississippi, the Dollar General is West Tallahatchie’s closest and most complete grocery store. Offering a variety of canned and processed foods for purchase, the Dollar General has no fresh produce. Owners of other markets in West Tallahatchie have expressed reluctance to stock fresh foods because they worry that insufficient demand will cause fruits and vegetables to rot on the shelf. Because of this, residents must drive forty-five minutes to the nearest Wal-Mart in order to purchase the bulk of their produce.

The site of Emmett Till’s murder in 1955, West Tallahatchie County continues to suffer from entrenched racial segregation and inequality. ETMC and other county stakeholders have been working to explore options for reducing disparities in food access between the East and West parts of the county to ensure that the African American community’s access to healthy food does not remain starkly inferior to that of the white community’s. In the last year, ETMC and the African American mayor of Glendora, another West Tallahatchie town, have discussed the development of a grocery cooperative, while a group of white women have started a farmers’ market in Sumner to help bring fresh food into the area from nearby farms. While these initiatives are theoretically beneficial to the whole community, the farmers’ market continues to be perceived as intended for the white population and largely inaccessible to the African-American population of West Tallahatchie. Thus far, efforts like the farmers’ market, the planning around a cooperative, and other initiatives have lacked cohesion among stakeholders or buy-in from the larger community.

Project Scope & Outcomes

Achieving food security depends on our ability to establish long-term successful, sustainable food systems. This includes understanding the needs of the community to build locally-based food economies. With the support of the Dow Sustainability Fellows program and Dow Distinguished Award, our team is partnering with West Tallahatchie County stakeholders to improve regional food security, especially for its most vulnerable members. In collaboration with ETMC, we aim to develop three future food system scenarios that present solutions for increasing access to healthy foods, explore barriers to success, and offer best practice recommendations for implementation.

Community engagement and buy-in is fundamental to ensuring that our initiative has the resilience to continue after the conclusion of our Dow project. Through interviews and community workshops with community members, leaders, and stakeholders, we will identify options for increasing food access that inform the definition and development of our project scenarios. Insights from interviews and workshops will be supplemented with findings from consumer information surveys, food audits, and comparative analysis. Our findings and future food system scenario analysis will be summarized in a 20-25 page report.

professional report for our client, community leaders, and local non-profits as well as the Dow Fellows program. Each of the three scenarios will explore a potential method for increasing food access in West Tallahatchie that incorporates the lenses of policy, marketing and economics, public and environmental health, community organization and development, education, social equity, and land use planning.

In addition to forming a foundation for scenario analysis, our community-based approach seeks to build capacity for increasing food access in the area by ensuring that suggested scenarios are relevant to West Tallahatchie’s needs and that scenario requirements are clear to those stakeholders who will implement them. We will use our Dow Distinguished Award funding to continue our on-the-ground work in the county. We plan to return for a third trip in November 2016 to West Tallahatchie to present our findings and scenario plans to county stakeholders, community members, and other relevant policy-makers, non-profit organizations, and parties that are working to achieve improved food security. This community workshop will not only provide a forum for our team to present our findings, but also help West Tallahatchie County move forward with implementation of strategies outlined in the scenarios we produce in order to lay the foundation for increasing food security in the region.

**Progress & Achievements**

Between May and August 2016, the team travelled to West Tallahatchie twice to complete interviews and community workshops. We summarize the completion of project phases and milestones below.

- **Key Informant Interviews:** In the first step of our project, we listened to community leaders, residents, and stakeholders in the four towns of West Tallahatchie (Glendora, Sumner, Tutwiler, and Webb) and the neighboring towns of Charleston and Rome share their community history and experiences with food access in the area. During our first trip to Mississippi in May 2016, the team interviewed a total of sixteen individuals covering a diverse mix of perspectives, including local mayors, business owners, and farmers as well as representatives of faith-based organizations and local non-profits. Interviews were guided by a common protocol (See Appendix A for Interview Questions), but were conducted in a semi-structured format allowing us to follow lines of questioning based on answers given by an interviewee. We observed many common themes across interviews regarding barriers to food access and methods for increasing food security. In particular, interviewees highlighted six potential strategies for implementation: (1) grocery store, (2) farmers’ market, (3) mobile market, (4) community gardens, (5) farming programs and (6) healthy corner store initiatives. Interviewees also noted that to be successful in West Tallahatchie any future food system would need to focus on overcoming particular barriers. For example, interviewees universally agreed that education and awareness programs need to be a part of any solution in order to change current behaviors and create demand for healthier foods.

- **Informational Contact Interviews:** There are many initiatives underway in the region that we plan to use to inform our analysis. The team identified and interviewed representatives of seven organizations - Delta Dimensions, Mississippi Sustainable Agriculture Network, Community Foundation of Northwestern Mississippi, Delta Health Alliance, Delta Fresh Foods Initiatives, Center for Population Studies, and McIntosh Sustainable Environment and Economic Development - working in the Delta region as well as across Mississippi. Conversations during these interviews confirmed many of the ideas key informant interviewees suggested for increasing food access. They also provided insight on effective techniques for similar communities and resources available in the greater area that will help us tailor our analysis to the local context.

- **Community Workshops:** The team returned to West Tallahatchie in August 2016 to host two community workshops. These workshops were designed to be a community conversation building off our interview findings. At each workshop we gave an overview of our project, introduced the
six primary strategies for increasing food access identified by our interviews, and voted to select the top three options. Based on the results of the voting, we moved into a discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of each solution and performed an envisioning activity where we talked about how a particular idea might be implemented in the area (See Appendix B for complete Workshop Agenda). With roughly twenty participants at our first workshop we had three small group discussions around farmers’ markets, mobile markets, and grocery stores. Because there was slightly lower attendance at our second workshop, we had a single group discussion about mobile markets.

During this time period, we also initiated a food audit and began distributing consumer information surveys.

- **Food Audit:** A key part of our project is to assess what fresh fruits and vegetables are currently available to residents of West Tallahatchie. We developed a nutrition environment and food audit tool that allows us to document the presence, absence, variety, cost, and quantity of fresh fruits and vegetables - including apples, bananas, oranges, melons, greens, beans, and squashes - at stores in the area. Two local community members were trained in implementation of this tool and are performing the audits at thirteen identified corner stores and markets within the county. While a number of stores have elected not to take part, the remaining audits will be completed by September 16, 2016.

- **Surveys:** As we completed our interviews, the team identified a need to collect consumer information from a larger sample of West Tallahatchie residents. To do so, we created a twenty-question survey asking about current shopping and healthy eating habits. With the help of University of Mississippi student volunteers, we are aiming to collect 150 completed surveys by September 25, 2016. The responses will provide our team with data on where and how often residents shop for groceries, average expenditures on food, important factors when determining where to shop, and most commonly purchased and used fruits and vegetables. Patterns that emerge from these surveys will help us make our scenarios more tailored to the needs and preferences of West Tallahatchie communities.

**Next Steps**

With the information-gathering phase of our project nearing completion, the team is moving into defining, developing, and writing three future food system scenarios for West Tallahatchie. In comparison to traditional alternatives analysis, developing scenarios is a tool that helps decision-makers envision an array of possible futures given a particular goals and objectives. We are currently in the process of determining the focus and components of the scenarios we will develop for West Tallahatchie based on the feedback and information we have received over the course of the summer. Over the next few weeks we plan to finalize the structure of these scenarios and begin writing our report. Throughout the writing process we will continue to consult with our client as well as key informant and informational contact interviewees to ensure that our final product meets the needs of West Tallahatchie.
APPENDIX A: KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Community Questions:

Say (can adlib): We would like to learn more about you and what it’s like living in your community.

1. Could you start by telling us a little bit about yourself?
2. What is the name of your community?
3. How long have you lived here?
   3.1. What community organizations and activities are you most involved in now or in the past? (These can be volunteer positions, unpaid jobs, or paid jobs)
      3.1.1. Probe: Have you held a leadership position in any of these? (This could be any position in which you made decisions on behalf of the organization.)
      3.1.2. Probe: If so, what was the title of the position?
4. What do you like about living in (name of community)?
4.1. What do you like about living in West Tallahatchie? (strengths)
4.2. What is difficult about living in West Tallahatchie? (barriers)

5. How connected do you feel to your community in (name of community)?
   5.1. How connected do you feel to other communities and towns in West Tallahatchie?
       5.1.1. Do you participate in community activities or organizations outside of your immediate community?
   5.2. Probe: Where do you connect with your community in (name of community)?

6. Think of a time when there was a problem in (name of community) that community members tried to resolve:
   6.1. Could you describe that scene for me?
   6.2. How was the need determined?
   6.3. How did the community organize themselves?
   6.4. In what ways was the community unified or together about how to tackle the issue?
   6.5. In what ways was the community divided about how to tackle the issue?
   6.6. Who had the most influence in helping the issue get resolved?
       6.6.1. What strengths did they draw upon to help resolve the issue?

7. Think of a time when there was a problem that affected all of West Tallahatchie:
   7.1. Could you describe that scene for me?
   7.2. How was the need determined?
   7.3. In what ways was the community unified or together about how to tackle the issue?
   7.4. In what ways was the community divided about how to tackle the issue?
   7.5. Who had the most influence in helping the issue get resolved?
       7.5.1. Describe the diversity of race or social class in this group of people.

8. What do you think are the major problems facing communities in this area?
   8.1. How are the needs of West Tallahatchie different from your community?

Say (can adlib): This feedback on (name of community) has been great. Our next few questions are going to focus on food in your community. Are you comfortable with continuing the interview or would you like a short break?

Say (exactly): We think of food security as the ability of all people to have access at all times to enough safe and nutritious food so that they can lead healthy and active lives. (WHO, World Food Summit 1996).

9. What role do you think food plays in (name of community)?
   9.1. Probe: Cultural significance, historical significance, agricultural history, etc.

10. How do you define healthy eating?

11. Do you think people in (name of community) think healthy eating is important?

12. Who do you think are the healthy eating ‘champions’ in (name of community)?
   (The people that are most concerned with improving healthy eating.)

Food Security Questions:
Say (can adlib): Now I’d like to ask you about fresh fruits and vegetables.

1. Do you purchase most of your fresh fruits and vegetables in West Tallahatchie?
   1.1. Do you go outside of West Tallahatchie to purchase any fresh fruits and vegetables?
   1.2. What are the most important things to you when you make choices about where to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables?
1.2.1. Prove: Cost, quality, quantity, type of produce available, etc.

2. If fresh fruits and vegetables were available in a convenient location in West Tallahatchie, what might still prevent community members from purchasing them?

3. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being very familiar and 5 being very unfamiliar, how familiar do you think community members are with cooking fresh fruits and vegetables?
   
   3.1. 1-Very Familiar; 2-Somewhat Familiar; 3-Neither Familiar Nor Unfamiliar; 
   
   4-Somewhat Unfamiliar; 5-Very Unfamiliar

4. Are there certain groups, members, neighborhoods, or areas of (name of community) that you think have a greater need for improved food access?
   
   4.1. Who are they?
   
   4.2. How do you think their needs could be met?

5. What do the communities of West Tallahatchie identify as potential solutions to lack of access to food in the area?
   
   5.1. What solutions do you think should be implemented?
   
   5.2. What are the barriers to these solutions?

6. Can you think of a way that improving food access could also promote economic growth? (This could be any way of increasing resources or income in your community.)

7. What do you think could encourage and support more community involvement around food access issues?

8. Do you know of any solutions for food security that have already been explored or are ongoing in West Tallahatchie?
   
   8.1. Do you work on any of these directly?
   
   8.2. Do you know anyone that we should reach out to that is working on these?

9. What factors have prevented these solutions from being implemented or prevented their success?
   

10. Is there anything I haven’t asked today, that you would like to share with us?

11. Would you be interested in attending a meeting in late July or early August to find out the results from these interviews?
   
   11.1. What do you suggest as a time and places to hold such a meeting?
   
   11.2. If they say no: Are there any other ways that we can keep in touch with you to share the results?
   
   11.2.1. If they say no: If you feel comfortable, would you mind sharing why you are might not be interested in keeping in touch?
APPENDIX B: COMMUNITY WORKSHOP AGENDA

Community Workshop: Food Access in West Tallahatchie
Monday, August 8, 2016 & Thursday, August 11, 2016
6:00-7:45pm

I. Welcome and Introductions (6:05-6:20)
   A. Introduce Ourselves
   B. Group Icebreaker: say where you’re from & favorite food
   C. Project Overview
   D. Goals & Outline for Workshop

II. Brainstorm Ideas for Increasing Food Access (6:20-6:40)
    A. Brainstorm of Potential Food System Ideas including (starting off with ideas we found from interviews to get the conversation going)

III. Idea Voting (6:40-6:50)
    A. Dot Voting: choose the top three that you would use/recommend/think would be best for the area
IV. Small Group Discussion (6:50-7:30)
   A. Develop top three ideas
   B. Advantages & Disadvantages Activity
      1. What are the pluses and minuses of this particular option?
   C. Envisioning Activity: describe what this option would look like
      1. Who would need to do what to make the idea work?
      2. Where it would go (use map for people to physically identify)?

V. Survey (7:30-7:40)

VI. Overview and Wrap-up (7:40-7:45)
   A. Timeline for project
   B. Describe what will be produced