

# El Paso County Food System Assessment Final Report and Recommendations

2020-2021

# Acknowledgments

The purpose of the Food System Assessment (FSA) in El Paso County was to identify policies and priorities to build capacity, innovate, and invest in our food system to improve residents' access to healthy food.

This multi-step process was the first FSA conducted in El Paso County. Overall strategy and structure were driven by community input and involved commitment from many partners. Grant funding was generously provided by the Colorado Springs Health Foundation. The majority of activities were conducted from 2017-2020, with disruptions and notable changes due to COVID-19 response.

Key partners included El Paso County Public Health (EPCPH), the Quad Innovation Partnership, MIG (consultant), and Food to Power (formerly Colorado Springs Food Rescue Mission). Many community residents also participated in various project phases.



# Background

Where we live impacts our ability to be physically active, access healthy food and other resources, interact socially, and access transportation options – all of which determine overall quality of life and health outcomes. One striking example of this is life expectancy in El Paso County, which differs by as much as 16 years across census tracts.

The food environment is composed of a variety of venues, including grocery stores, schools, convenience stores, full-service restaurants, fast food restaurants, farm stands, community gardens, urban farms, and other places where food can be obtained.

The abundance, location, stock, connection to transportation, and ability to accept Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) benefits at these venues all affect healthy food access.<sup>1</sup>



FSAs may be used to develop a baseline understanding of, and to track changes in, the local food environment. The assessment is typically used to measure the assets and needs in communities regarding ratio of healthy to less healthy options, food security, economic development, and the productive capacity of the land, i.e., the extent to which the community can grow and supply food. FSAs can be valuable tools for better understanding the social, economic, and regulatory context of the food system and can point to opportunities for improving the local food environment through policy making and investment.

El Paso County's FSA was conducted with the entire county in mind. However, early steps within the process identified four "neighborhoods of opportunity" which were further explored as the study progressed. Specific input and subsequent recommendations were developed for these focus areas and are explained later in this report. This document summarizes the findings from activities during Phase I and II and provides suggested interventions to improve the food environment within the identified neighborhoods of opportunity and as applicable, throughout El Paso County.

The assessment was designed to increase understanding around:

1. The economic, regulatory and geographic context of our food system;
2. Public knowledge, attitude and behaviors as they relate to our food system;
3. How barriers and opportunities within our food system impact access and consumption of nutritious, affordable food; and
4. Ways local government and community partners can advance food production, distribution, and access to impact public health and quality of life for El Paso County residents.

<sup>1</sup> Colorado Blueprint to End Hunger: [endhungerco.org/the-plan](http://endhungerco.org/the-plan)

# Methods Summary

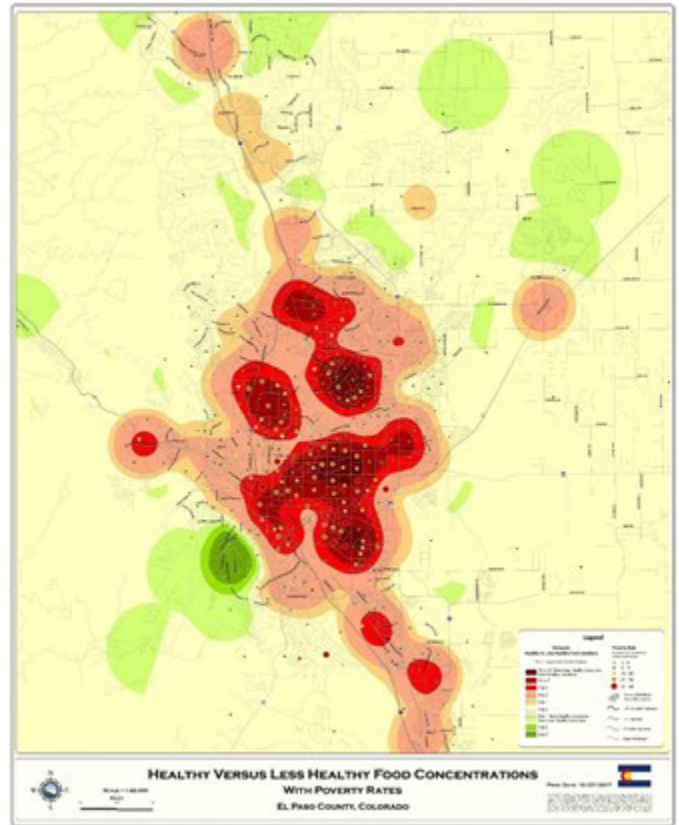
## Phase I Preliminary Assessment

The [first phase](#) of the FSA was conducted in 2017 to provide data-driven recommendations on matters, policies, programs, operations, and land use rights affecting local food issues and the needs of the communities related to the food system.

To facilitate baseline evaluation and discussions, several maps were created and shared with the FSA advisory committee. These maps highlighted relationships between food retail environment and poverty levels (“healthy food versus less healthy food concentrations”), food retail environment and transit access, access to supportive services during food insecurity, and existing and potential food production sites in El Paso County.

Following Phase I, from 2018 through 2020, EPCPH worked with Food to Power, the Quad Innovation Partnership, and a consulting group, MIG, to conduct the following activities:

1. Primary data collection (both qualitative and quantitative) from residents within target neighborhoods around barriers and opportunities to accessing affordable, nutritious food.
2. An audit of local policies and regulations impacting access to healthy foods.
3. A market analysis of neighborhood-scale food-oriented development in the target communities.
4. Activation of community food centers and identification of resident-driven initiatives in each of the target communities to pilot neighborhood-based interventions.
5. Recommended policy, systems, and environmental (PSE) changes to guide next steps and action plans with food system stakeholders and partners.



## **Phase II: Quad Innovation Partnership -- Market Analysis of Neighborhood-Scale Food-Oriented Interventions**

A team of undergraduate students facilitated through the Quad Innovation Partnership was commissioned to develop and validate interventions to improve healthy food access within targeted neighborhoods. These interventions were informed by community-level data from Phase I of the assessment, lived-experience data collected by Food to Power, and supplemented by additional local and national data collected by the student team. Recommendations were then validated by studying comparable communities throughout the United States with consideration for the unique characteristics of each neighborhood to assure any barriers to access within specific neighborhoods were addressed.

Their analysis identified a portfolio of 12 interventions of interest and provided comparative examples from other communities to illustrate the costs and impacts. The interventions in their report are:

1. Food access website
2. Neighborhood ambassadors
3. Food literacy programs
4. Incentivizing established vendors to increase healthy food inventories
5. Farming internships
6. Community gardens
7. Alternative growing systems
8. Cooking classes
9. Outdoor farm and art markets
10. Mobile farmers' markets
11. Food hub development
12. Carpool/rideshare programs

## **Phase II: Audit of Local Policies and Regulations -- MIG Consultant**

EPCPH worked with the consultant MIG on a policy audit to assess where policy or regulation is impeding or promoting access to nutritious, affordable food, with a specific focus on neighborhood-scale food environments. The goals of the audit were:

- Establish a baseline assessment of policies that impact food access in El Paso County.
- Bring various sectors together to discuss food-related policies.
- Establish an audit methodology from best practices that can be a foundation for future food audits in El Paso County and its municipalities.
- Determine policy alignments across jurisdictions and develop overarching focus topics.
- Recommend adjustments and identify gaps in existing food-related policies.

The consultant reviewed existing policies for El Paso County and the City of Colorado Springs under four categories: land use policies or plans, other community policies or plans, land development regulations, and policy initiatives (not yet policies). Additionally, they met with dozens of stakeholders in the community and overlaid their input with themes from the policy assessment to develop several food policy themes to categorize recommendations in a manner that is tailored to the unique needs of our community.

## Phase II: Food to Power Primary Data Collection in Target Communities

After the first phase of the assessment was completed, additional, layered activities were critical to develop more specific, resident-driven recommendations to improve the food system, including appropriate neighborhood-based interventions. With funding from Colorado Springs Health Foundation, EPCPH contracted with Food to Power (formerly Colorado Springs Food Rescue) to do a participatory action research (PAR) project to increase data- and community-informed understanding of access to and consumption of fresh, nutritious food in the identified neighborhoods of opportunity. A PAR approach encourages collective inquiry and co-creation of solutions by and with the local community or neighborhood.

Food to Power canvassed over 725 households, conducted 68 interviews, hosted five food fairs which engaged a total of 180 neighbors, and contributed to 12 community events. They conducted focus groups in all four neighborhoods of opportunity. Food to Power also engaged neighbors through their no-cost grocery programs and hosted free plant giveaways.

In order to maintain contact with neighbors over time, Food to Power started a database to sustain communication with over 400 neighbors in the target communities. They developed and strengthened relationships with stakeholders such as the Knob Hill Urban Arts District, Meadows Park Community Center, Pikes Peak Library District-Ruth Holley/Cheyenne Mountain Branches, Hillside Community Center, Servicios De La Raza, the Helping Hand Mobile Grocery Store, and vegan soul food chef Bo Bowale. Just as the COVID-19 pandemic was beginning, Food to Power partnered with Elena Salinas, owner of the Helping Hand Grocery store. Salinas conducted weekend pop-up markets in all four target neighborhoods. Food to Power invested in the startup costs of her micro-enterprise which served about 75 residents.

# Results and Findings

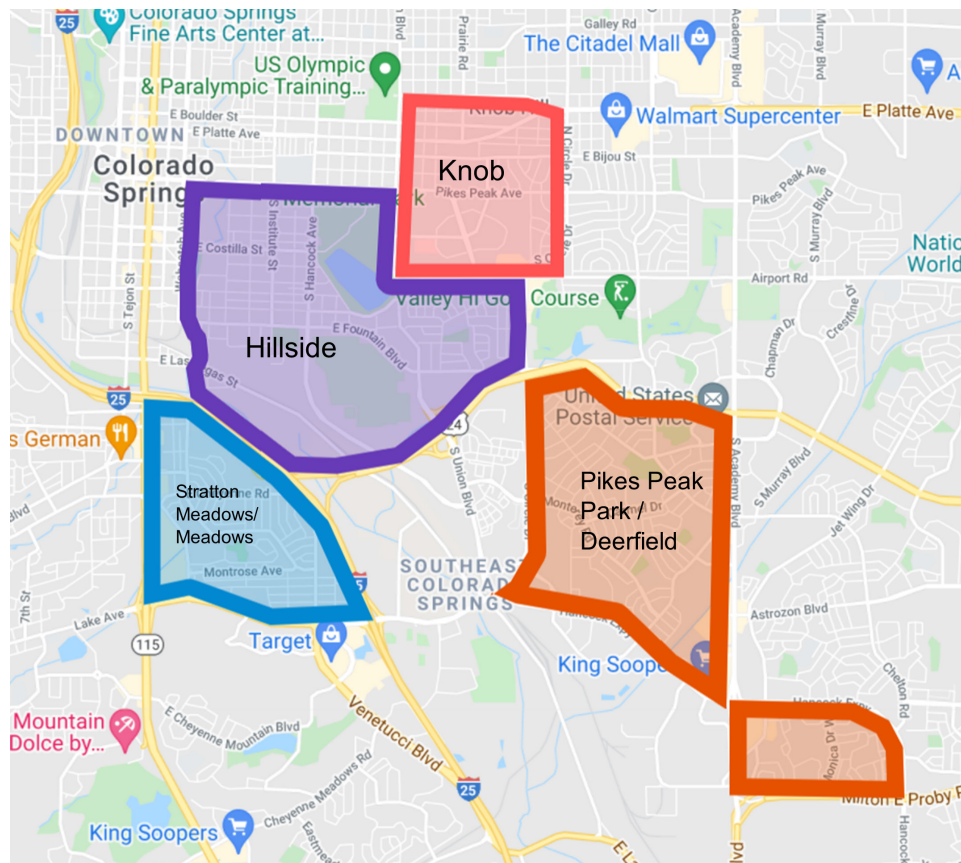
## Phase I

- Distinct geographic areas of opportunity were identified that would benefit from improvements to the food environment.
- Neighborhood-scale improvements to the food environment – such as small grocers, community kitchens, community gardens, urban farms, farmers’ markets, and farm stands – are needed.
- Land use policies, like zoning, are promising tools to shift the food environment in a more positive direction.
- Limited food production overall in our region affects the whole community, as food production is an additional indicator of food security.

## Neighborhoods of Opportunity

The initial data review during Phase I led to the identification of four “neighborhoods of opportunity” for focused food system improvements in El Paso County; these included areas with disproportionately high access to unhealthy food intersecting with neighborhood-level trends of low median income, limited vehicle access and educational attainment, and that had a higher percentage of Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) residents than the city as a whole. These areas include the following neighborhoods: Hillside, Knob Hill, Pikes Peak Park/Deerfield Hills, and Stratton Meadows/Meadows Park.

Because what is defined as a neighborhood may vary, we refer to neighborhoods both as defined by the City of Colorado Springs and as they are widely understood by the community members who live there. While need and opportunity are not strictly confined by neighborhood boundaries, the neighborhoods listed below served as anchors for understanding the general geographic focus for the targeted Phase II activities. The neighborhood boundaries below show these focus areas, though some boundaries were used flexibly during the assessment activities.



## Phase II: Market Analysis and Food-Oriented Interventions

Of the twelve interventions that the Quad Innovation Partnership initially explored, those listed below were researched in more detail. The Quad provided basic proposals for each, including draft budgets, identifying staffing needs, etc. These interventions were the overlapping and key strategies identified to improve food access during their assessment:

- **Develop a food access website** to inform and educate residents about nutrition, recipes, and local food access events.
- **Utilize neighborhood ambassadors** to work on increasing Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) registrations, distributing food from local food banks, hosting food-based events, or introducing food literacy to community members.
- **Incentivize healthy food within established vendors** to purchase and display healthy options (such as fresh produce), increase produce inventory, and collaborate on food access projects.
- **Improve access to transportation**, such as carpool/rideshare programs.
- **Improve convenient access to food**, such as using mobile food vans to bring fresh food into neighborhoods, rather than residents needing transportation to get to affordable grocery stores.

## Phase II: Food to Power Survey Results and Identified Barriers

**Transportation:** Residents may be dependent on family, friends or neighbors, or public transportation. Public transportation presents challenges due to limited schedules during, and even before, the pandemic. Neighbors described going to the grocery stores within closest proximity to their residences such as Walmart and Safeway.

**Food availability:** Residents described challenges in finding foods that met their dietary needs at the grocery store. Mostly, these residents obtained their food pre-boxed from food pantries and churches or whatever was available on the shelves of the grocery store. Specifically related to the pandemic, these neighbors described bare shelves and unavailability of meat as barriers.

**Food affordability:** With some residents reporting monthly food budgets ranging from \$25 dollars per month to \$300 dollars per month for families of two or more, affordability is a primary barrier. For some it is a barrier to accessing food in general. Others were able to feed their families on their food budget but identified affordability as a barrier to accessing food they considered healthy such as fresh food, produce, and meat in particular.

**Health concerns due to COVID-19:** Some residents expressed concerns about going to the grocery store due to having health conditions that put them at higher risk for COVID-19. These residents relied on their friends, family members, and community organizations to deliver food. COVID-19 magnified and exacerbated the existing barriers to food access. For example, some residents had increased difficulty accessing stores because of the increased health risks associated with entering a public space. Further, availability was reduced as many products were sold out and they may not have been able to afford to “stockpile” those items when available. In particular, seniors experienced difficulties in accessing food. Health-related barriers are a constant for residents whose physical and/or mental health condition(s) may make general transportation riskier or more difficult (e.g., use of walkers or wheelchairs, being immunocompromised, etc.) The fact that data collection overlapped with the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the underlying need to reduce these barriers, and also to prepare for future public health emergencies and disasters.

## Phase II: Opportunities identified through the policy audit

### 1. **Food access equity: financial access**

Bolster programs and partnerships around food assistance and to increase fresh food distribution. Subsidize access to healthy food, such as increasing income for farmers, promoting SNAP at farmers' markets, implementing tax increment financing for small grocers and providing free community gardens. Encourage or advocate for higher wages for all so that fewer people rely on food assistance to afford the food they want and need.

### 2. **Food access equity: physical access**

Utilize land use designations, built-form tools, and incentives to encourage healthy food stores and urban farms/gardens within walking distance of residential areas and along major transit corridors.

### 3. **Food education equity**

Increase or implement policies and programs that increase food and nutrition knowledge, including how to grow your own food and make healthier choices. Partner with school districts and consider community-wide campaigns.

### 4. **Local food production**

Increase zoning and land dedication for urban agriculture. Work with neighborhood groups and homeowner's associations to encourage community gardens and private garden allowances. Consider utility benefits and agricultural protections in consideration of water shortages.

### 5. **Local marketing and distribution**

Implement policies and recommendations that improve the efficiency of distribution including cooperative markets, farmers' markets and community-supported agriculture (CSA) as well as public resources and technological advances. Relax policies for the sale of seasonal produce and those that restrict healthy food vendors and healthy food events.

# Policy, Systems, and Environmental Changes to Increase Access to Affordable, Nutritious Food

The long-term objective of the food system assessment is to increase access to and consumption of affordable, nutritious food, particularly in neighborhoods with easier access to less healthy food and disparate levels of societal and economic burden.

Local officials and stakeholder organizations need data-informed policy, systems, and environmental change (PSE) recommendations to address the challenge of equitable access to nutritious, affordable food.

The key barriers for residents experiencing difficulty in regularly accessing nutritious food were inadequate transportation, local availability of preferred food items, and cost. A variety of strategies including addressing policies and public planning, implementing new programs, and building new partnerships could address these barriers.

The following section will summarize recommendations and findings from various phases and activities of El Paso County's Food System Assessment.

## Recommendations and Strategies to Improve Local Food Environment

Influence and implement policies, systems, and partnerships that promote:

- Support for food affordability (such as SNAP and higher wages)
- Physical access (proximity and transportation) to healthy food markets
- Incentives for healthy, fresh food at retail locations and in facilities that serve food like schools, hospitals and institutions of higher learning
- Food and nutrition knowledge, including food preparation
- Land designated for local food production
- Marketing and distribution of local foods markets

The largest and most common barriers to accessing fresh, nutritious food were affordability and transportation. Therefore, the recommendation is that systems-level solutions and partnerships aimed at reducing these two barriers should be the highest priority for developing and implementing effective strategies. For example, public transportation could be expanded and better supported to make grocery outlets more accessible, and legislation affecting wages could help make food more affordable by increasing the earning potential of underpaid residents.

## Opportunities and Future Activities

With continued input and future convenings among community stakeholders, partners, and residents, we envision creating an action plan to implement or integrate the opportunities and activities below, as viable. Additional assessment may be needed to determine the feasibility and potential impact of pilot projects toward improving access to and consumption of affordable, nutritious food. In addition, further assessment could determine if these recommendations would still have impact and relevance considering long-term effects from COVID-19. Our plan will create opportunities for community involvement and ownership over solutions and will strive to include appropriate evaluation methods, such as collecting residents' stories (qualitative) and measuring participation and with pre- and post-surveys (quantitative). Below are recommendations for interested stakeholders, community leaders, and partners to consider as part of continued efforts to improve our local food system and access to healthy, nutritious food.

### Invest in resident leaders and food ambassadors

Utilize neighborhood ambassadors and resident leader models to share nutrition resources and to effectively communicate and organize within specific communities.

- Food security initiatives should include the proper support, education, organizing infrastructure and participation metrics that allow those most impacted to be at the forefront of advocacy.
- These ambassadors can work to integrate neighborhood-specific recommendations, gather community input, plan local activities, etc.

### Decrease food insecurity and improve access through food assistance enrollment/coordination

- Increase access to SNAP, Women, Infants and Children (WIC), and [Double Up Food Bucks](#) (DUFb).
  - "The Double Up Food Bucks program doubles the value of SNAP (or food stamps) benefits spent at participating markets and food retail stores, helping people bring home more healthy fruits and vegetables while supporting local farmers. The wins are three-fold: more families have access to fruits and vegetables, local farmers gain new customers, and more food dollars stay in the local economy." (Hunger Free Colorado). Increase enrollment in eligible programs through outreach.
  - Increase number of retail stores accepting SNAP and farmers' markets accepting SNAP and DUFb.
  - Invest in pop-up and community markets. Pop-up markets help ensure that fresh food is available and convenient where a full-service grocery store may not be possible. Fresh food markets that are easily accessible to residents, accept SNAP benefits, and have consistent and routine schedules help promote increased fresh food consumption.
- Increase working wages so that residents who are able to work full time can access nutritious food by earning a livable wage and being able to purchase their own food.

### Improve food literacy and food preparation competency

- Expand nutrition education through Snap-ED, Cooking Matters, and WIC. These programs teach nutrition and meal preparation skills.
- Invest in gathering spaces. Place-based spaces allow residents to gather and provide opportunities for regular and frequent spaces required to foster relationships. Gathering spaces in which residents are able to connect around food provide opportunities for organizing. They also assist in building resilient neighborhood food systems that support access to fresh, healthy, and affordable food.
  - Develop a comprehensive food system website to easily share food locations, transportation access, schedules, food literacy and education opportunities, etc.
- Examples:
  - [Food Well Alliance \(Atlanta, GA\)](#)
  - [Valley Food Partnership \(Montrose, CO\)](#)
  - [Greater Cincinnati Regional Food Policy Council](#)
  - [Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems](#)

### **Improve transportation access and proximity to fresh food**

- Establish centralized, convenient farmers' markets within rural El Paso County communities; work to increase SNAP and WIC-enrolled food establishments for those communities.
- Incentivize and promote mobile food vans/trucks to bring convenient access within neighborhoods.

### **Incentivize healthy food at vendor locations**

- Participate in Colorado Blueprint to End Hunger's Access & Engagement Workgroup 2 & 3, which includes a WIC/SNAP Retailers Project Team that works on strategies to increase healthy food at retail locations. How to join: [CO Blueprint to End Hunger Workgroups and Project Teams](#)
- Adapt the successful [Denver Healthy Corner Store Initiative](#) for El Paso County. This initiative helps corner store owners expand and promote their healthy and fresh food selection. By working with store owners, food distributors, and community residents, the initiative works to make it easier for families to find healthy food options. Choosing more fruits, vegetables and whole grains reduce the risk of heart disease, obesity, diabetes, and other chronic diseases.
- Increase participation in Double Up Food Bucks, a program that allows SNAP dollars to be doubled (up to \$20/day), at SNAP-authorized farmers' markets and small grocery stores.
- Increase contractual commitment for serving healthy food in facilities with food service (schools, jails, hospitals, etc.).

### **Invest in and support local urban/community gardens**

Convene partners interested in sustaining community gardens and establish direction for leadership to sustain activities long-term.

### **Champion/Be an ambassador for policy, zoning, and built environment opportunities**

Participate in City of Colorado Springs and other community planning and steering committees and coalitions addressing land use, zoning, and built environment infrastructure to support access to healthy food, food production, and transportation to convenient access points. Learn more: [Colorado Springs Civic Engagement Program](#).

# Conclusion

Programs, policies, and system improvements that support increased access to nutritious food for all El Paso County residents are essential for equitable health and for long-term reduction of chronic diseases. El Paso County Public Health and community stakeholders working to support local food systems are partnering to inform local decision makers and leaders through accurate, local data about barriers to food access. The two most common and prominent barriers identified by residents and in research were transportation and affordability. COVID-19 exacerbated these existing barriers for many residents and highlighted the urgency to continue addressing and reducing them within communities experiencing disparities. Affordability should be viewed both from the perspective of how much food costs and how much people are earning, as often the barrier may be low wages rather than high prices. Transportation, similarly, can be viewed from multiple lenses including access to public transit, safety and accessibility of walking routes, and access to private transport. Beyond creating the infrastructure to conveniently and safely secure healthy food, providing adequate education and outreach to support food literacy also plays a role in ensuring increased consumption of healthy food. El Paso County Public Health continues to explore new partnerships and strategies along with partners and community members to improve our local food system. Together, we will work toward increasing access to fresh, nutritious food, with an emphasis on neighborhoods of opportunity identified within this report.



## **Mission**

Our mission is to promote and protect public health and environmental quality across El Paso County through people, prevention and partnerships.

## **Vision**

Our vision is for all El Paso County residents to live in thriving communities where every person has the opportunity to achieve optimal health.

## **Values**

Integrity  
Service Excellence  
Collaboration  
Innovation  
Data-Driven  
Respect

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