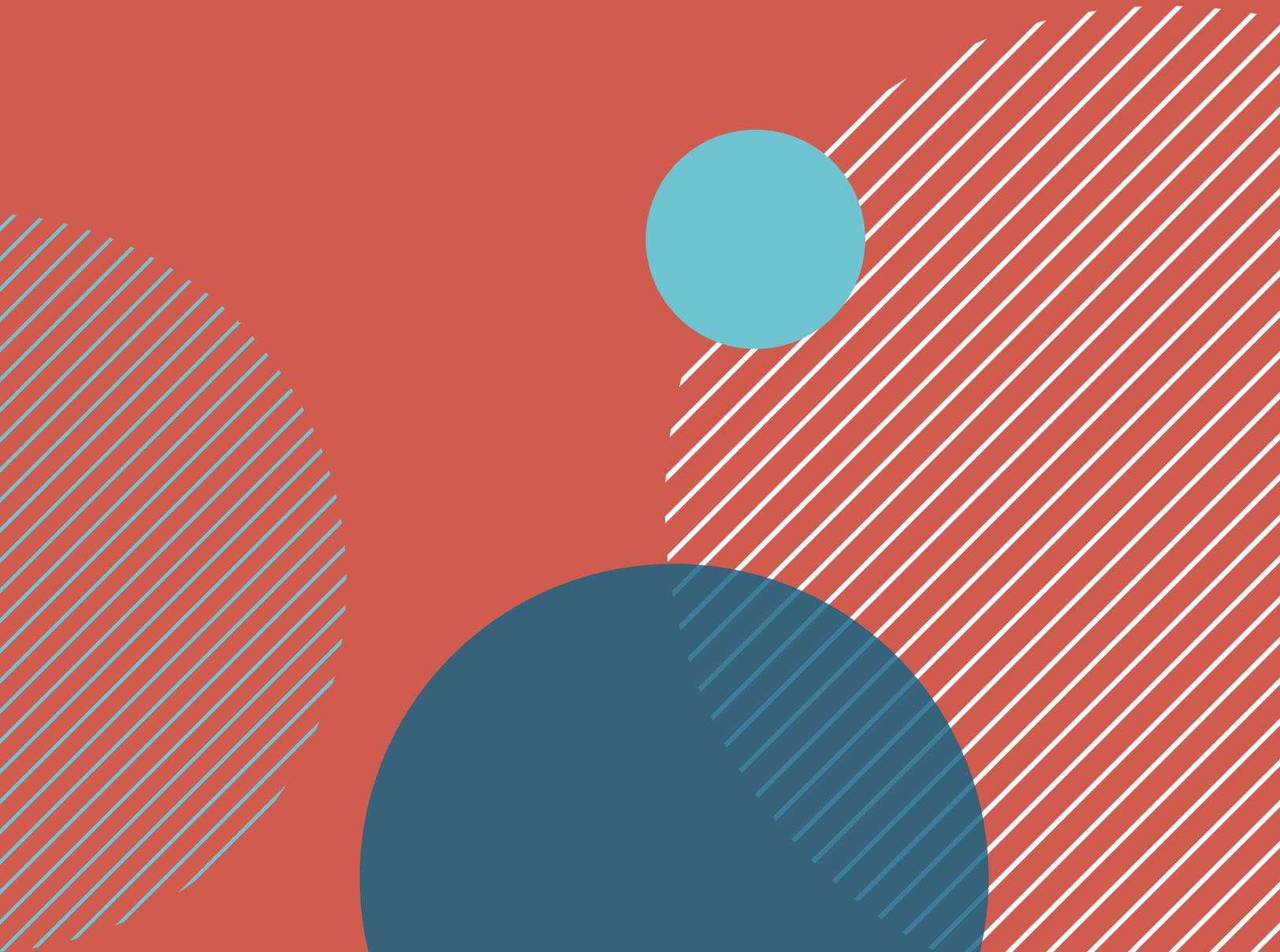


CAN COMMUNITY COUNCIL FOOD INSECURITY REPORT JANUARY 2022

COMMUNITY ADVANCEMENT NETWORK (CAN)



CAN COMMUNITY COUNCIL FOOD INSECURITY REPORT

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ATTACHMENT 1 USING GARDENING TO TRANSFORM COMMUNITIES

Background & Supporting Data

Facets of Food Insecurity:

Limited resources (income insecurity leads to food insecurity)

- Increasing split between higher-paid steady jobs and lower-paid unstable jobs
- Financial – lower-end wages have not kept up with inflation for decades
- Time – longer commutes, increasing need for multiple jobs
- Housing costs have gotten much higher and must be paid before food purchases
- Food is often the only household expense that can be reduced in emergencies
- Uncertain income makes cheaper bulk purchases less feasible

Limited access to good food

- “Food deserts” with no full-scale grocery stores (coupled with limited transportation)
- Generational loss of food preparation knowledge/skills
- Dependence on fast & heavily-processed foods linked to health problems

Societal responses are helpful but not fully adequate

- Food stamps (SNAP) & WIC give flexibility, but cover only part of need
- SNAP/WIC eligibility is limited, but even so many eligible families do not participate
- Food banks are less flexible in goods provided, but have fewer eligibility limits
- School-based food programs cover part of needs of most students; quality and scope varies
- Support for local farms/gardens limited but growing
- Significant recent federal support increases (SNAP, child tax credit) may help

Short Term and Long Term Effects of Food Insecurity

- Hunger and anxiety reduce effectiveness in work, school, & life
- Malnutrition can have long-term effects, especially for children
- Long-term benefits such as education often sacrificed for short-term food needs
- Lack of control over food availability can lead to indiscriminate eating of unhealthy food

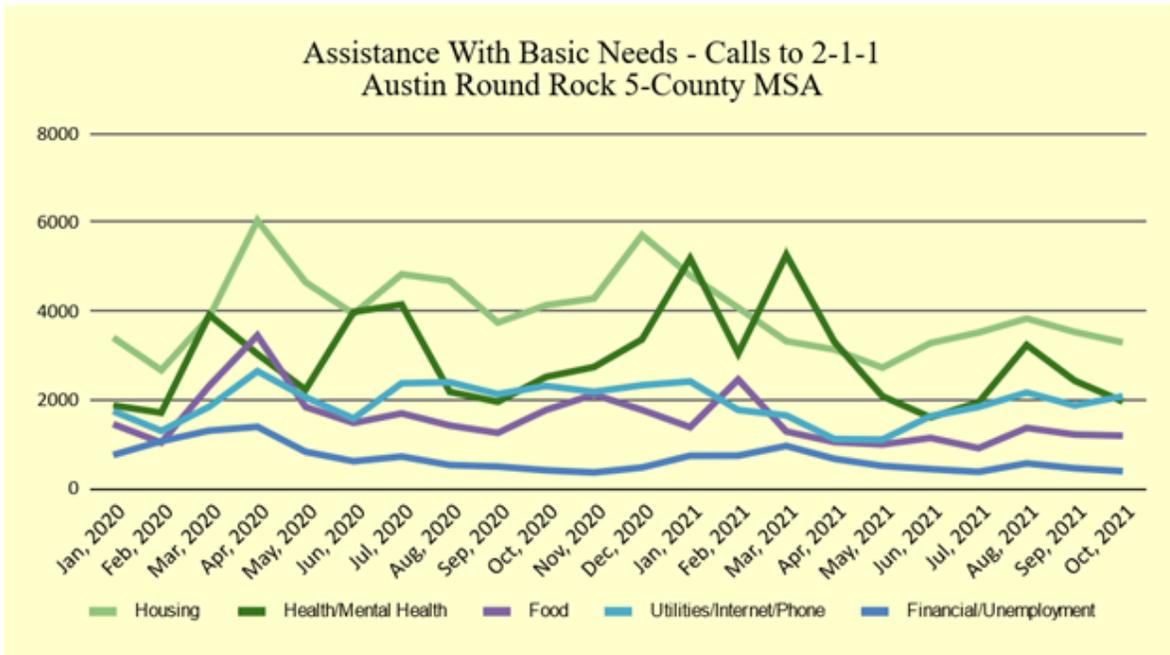
Supporting Data

To provide context as to the decision of the CAN Community Council to select this issue for study, we share two charts below. One is a chart outlining the trends relating to food security that we report on an annual basis on the CAN Dashboard. The data show a downward trend with regard to food insecurity (... a good outcome) through 2019. Projections by Feeding America for 2020 and 2021 appear to suggest that this downward trend will continue notwithstanding the economic impact of the pandemic and the economic restructuring that is occurring.

Given the fact that we all witnessed, first-hand, that a food insecurity crisis was unfolding during the early parts of the pandemic as well as during the aftermath of Winter Storm Uri, we felt that it was essential to show the fluctuations in the community need for food by examining calls to 2-1-1. The graph below shows the big spike in April 2020 and February 2021. While overall need may be decreasing on an annual basis on-average, instituting added measures to improve food access are needed so that families have what they need day-to-day as well as during times of crisis.

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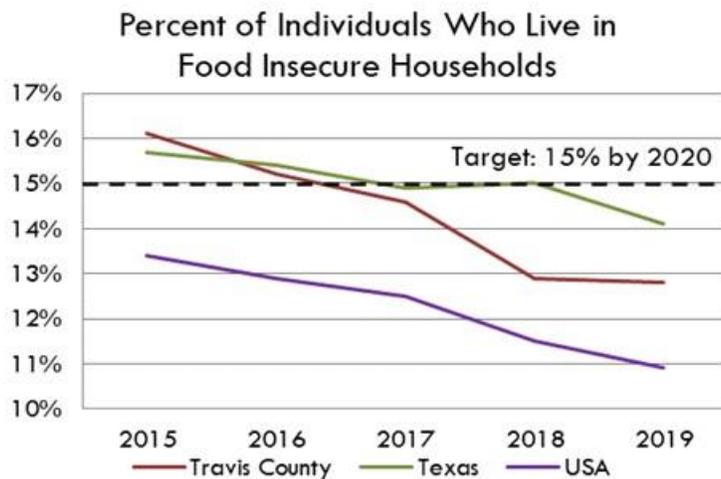
Background & Supporting Data (continued)



Source: United Way Greater Austin and Children’s Optimal Health

<https://coh-tx.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=8d9051e9503d4338b6469c7a343881a1>

CAN Dashboard Data – 2021 Report



Approximately 13% of Travis County residents faced food insecurity in 2019. That means they had limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods, according to [Feeding America](#), the nation’s leading domestic hunger-relief charity. Rates of food insecurity in Travis County have declined after reaching a high of 18% in 2011.

Summary of Deliberations

Historical Context

At the beginning of the year, the CAN Community Council selected three priority issue areas to explore and assigned members of the Council to one of the study groups: housing, mental health and food security. The food-insecurity subgroup analyzed the topic during the spring and invited speakers for presentations during the May, June, and July meetings of the Community Council. These presentations were from Katie Wye of the Texas Hunger Initiative, Edwin Marty of the City of Austin Office of Food Policy, Tiffany Washington of Dobbin-Kauw Garden Farm, Ron Finley of the Ron Finley Project (video on urban gardening), and Simone Benz of the Austin Sustainable Food Center.

Discussion Within the Food-Insecurity Work Group

Several perspectives and potential approaches emerged during the preliminary discussions. Even though there were some important relevant federal actions under consideration in Washington, there was agreement that the CAN focus should be on areas where local action was feasible. The challenge was to find actions that might make an important difference, involved multiple CAN partners, and were not already getting full attention.

A recurrent theme of our discussions was that food insecurity is primarily a byproduct of our society's drastic economic inequity. Widespread provision of steady jobs at decent wages would eliminate the need for most of the "band-aid" approaches (SNAP/WIC, food banks, free school lunches) that our society now uses in this area. But we also feel that the relationship of many Americans to food is damaged in other ways — many well-paid people are poorly-fed even if they never go hungry. Many become obese and diabetic. So for us, food security includes making people more aware and empowered with respect to nutrition and food selection, in addition to making the availability of food more dependable.

The government/charity approaches, band-aids though they may be, remain important for now since there is little immediate prospect of deep economic reform. Usage of food-support programs has increased substantially during the pandemic (6 million more people are enrolled in SNAP now than in 2019). Further, the Biden administration is permanently increasing monthly SNAP payments by about 30%.

All local governments have included food provision as an important element in their pandemic responses, so this area probably has gotten more of its immediate needs addressed than more difficult areas such as housing and education. However, some of the pandemic-related food-program enhancements are due to expire soon, so increased attention is appropriate for the immediate future.

One area, **sustainable local farming and gardening**, was identified in our discussions as having particular potential to enable improvements in people's access to good food. Local farming can be part of a nutrition-aware social ecosystem that produces many natural foods at sufficient scale and efficiency to be generally available and affordable during their seasons. At first glance, gardening may seem amateurish and peripheral by comparison; in fact, however, it can have a transformative effect in the lives of people alienated from a hostile economy (who are often food-insecure as a result). Gardening is also an area where modest amounts of additional societal support (building on pioneering existing activity) can unleash numerous positive individual actions that in turn reinforce each other — precisely the feedback conditions that can lead to significant social change. See Attachment 1 for a more detailed explanation of this part of our analysis, which is the basis of our main recommendation.

Recommendations for Action

Overall theme:

Recommendations should focus on supporting and extending various aspects of urban farming, especially activities that go beyond individual-plot gardens and provide opportunities for contact between different types of people. While people want the broader context to be mentioned (e.g., that food insufficiency stems from income inequality), any other recommendation ideas should be connected to this basic theme. For example, community gardening is relevant to our concern with good food (as distinct from over-processed food) because even occasional encounters with fresh-raised food will raise people's standards in all their food interactions.

I. Land

City, County, ISDs, some companies have pieces of land saved for later use or unsuitable for building but good for growing things. We call on CAN partners to review their real estate holdings for unused, undeveloped plots of land of at least ¼ acre to be made available for community farming.

We recommend that the City of Austin Office of Sustainability coordinate with other departments to push for full development of the land already reserved for community gardens, including in some innovative formats. Funding could be passed through to area nonprofits to manage the community farms.

II. Supplies

A. Farmers

- a. Labor
 - i. Job fairs connecting prospective laborers with farmers.
 - ii. Paid agricultural internships for students.
- b. Education
 - i. Sponsorship for minority farmers to attend workshops and conferences that promote regenerative and sustainable farming practices.
- c. Machinery
 - i. Loans and grants to allow farmers to have up-to-date and high quality machinery to allow for efficient mass production.

B. Home and Community Gardeners

- a. Education and mentorship programs by local organizations to assist in small scale home/community garden development for cultivating edible food.
- b. Continued support of organizations that distribute materials and resources for home gardeners such as Keep Austin Beautiful and Sustainable Food Center.
- c. Gift cards/vouchers available to supplement home grown food via volunteering, attending garden cooking classes,

III. Labor

Community farms require consistent labor to thrive. Many in our community who could benefit from access to community-grown food are unable to commit to regular volunteer hours due to work, child care, etc.

We recommend that CAN partners coordinate volunteer opportunities for their employees to provide labor assistance for community farms. Many businesses have required community service or volunteer hours and community farming would provide a consistent venue.

The City of Austin and Travis County have allocated funds for housing of those who are experiencing homelessness. We recommend that homeless liaison staff coordinate with parks and recreation staff to identify areas where people experiencing homelessness could be allocated living space in exchange for providing labor for on-site community gardens.

We note that the Festival Beach community garden is an example of good use of volunteers.

We recommend that CAN school district, community college, and university partners offer classes and training in agriculture as a trade skill and/or expand current program offerings. Our youth need to be made aware of food insecurity issues in our community and see community farming and agriculture as a viable career path.

IV. Distribution

There are currently many locations in Austin and the surrounding area that provide distribution of food and groceries. We recommend that these be connected with fresh food from local farmers and community gardens.

We recommend that our school district CAN partners incorporate food distribution programs into their parent and community events. Providing all families access to fresh fruits and vegetables at Back to School Nights or other school wide-events would help in three ways: [i] acquaint more people with high-quality food, [ii] avoid the stigma of accepting charity, and [iii] spread information about community farms.

We also recommend incentivizing the creation of healthy food retailers such as farmer's markets in accessible locations.

We recommend that CAN school district partners utilize community liaison staff members to dispense information to area families about WIC, SNAP, and other state and federal food access programs.

We recommend that CAN partner CAP Metro publicize free distribution events in the community on buses and trains and provide days when families ride for free to certain events.

Credits

About the CAN Community Council

The CAN Community Council is one of two Councils that guide the work of the Community Advancement Network. The CAN Community Council is a self-appointed body that is made up of up to 30 people who reflect the diversity of interests, concerns, organizations, issues and populations of the Central Texas community. The role of the Community Council is to provide a link between the community at large and the policy makers and elected officials who serve on the CAN Board of Directors.

If you are interested in joining the CAN Community Council, fill out a form at this site:

<http://canatx.org/community-council/>

About This Report

In 2021, the CAN Community Council (Council) focused its work on finding possible solutions to community needs that have presented unique and difficult to resolve challenges emerging from the pandemic. The Community Council selected three pandemic-related topics on which to focus. Specifically, these topics include addressing: the evictions crisis; food insecurity; and mental health and wellness. The aim is to identify policies and programs that elected officials, policy makers and other decision-makers can consider pursuing or implementing to improve access for and the well-being of individuals and families living in Austin, Travis County and Central Texas. The CAN Community Council Report on Evictions was published in July 2021, and we anticipate that the CAN Community Council Report on Mental Health and Wellness will be published in the coming months.

2021 Community Council Members

Saatvik Ahluwalia	Kelly Crook	Rachel Hampton	Caroline Reynolds
Lydia Galvan	Donovon DePriest	Lou Serna	
Lisa Boyd	Hunter Ellinger	Gloria Vera-Bedolla	
Patricia Camacho-Longoria	Nancy Gilliam	James May	
Nora Comstock	Laura Goettsche	Anaami Pandit Haji	

CAN Staff

Raul Alvarez, Executive Director

Jelina Tunstill, Program Coordinator

Carlos Soto, Research Analyst

ATTACHMENT 1

CAN COMMUNITY COUNCIL FOOD INSECURITY REPORT JANUARY 2022



**USING
GARDENING TO
TRANSFORM
COMMUNITIES**



**CONSIDERING
THE BROADER
CONTEXT**

**An Opportunity to
Build Relationships
and Strengthen
Communities**

Attachment 1

Using Gardening to Transform Communities

The potential for gardening to be part of dramatic improvements in neglected communities may not be obvious to people whose exposure to gardening has mainly been as a decorative hobby at middle-class homes. But the reason that growing food has effectively disappeared from the lives of prosperous urbanites is that they have easy access to commercial food at whatever quality and quantity level they choose. They also mostly live in pleasant physical environments which they control.

Many people, however, do not have these advantages. Fewer and fewer can afford to own their own homes. As tenants, they are often subject to rigid rules and seldom have control over land. If they or their family did not have the resources to provide a good education, or if they have been caught up in the criminal-justice system, they may be limited to either illegal work or to unsatisfying jobs with low pay. Often the food-related businesses in their area are both low-quality and uneconomical. Such situations are recipes for alienation, often leading to negative behavior that aggravates the problems — a vicious circle.

But pioneering efforts in several such areas have used gardening as a crucial feature of efforts to transform the relationship of people to their community, to food, and to each other. This entailed engaging with city government to eliminate legal obstacles to conversion of unused space to gardens, empowering individuals by sharing proven methods, and enlisting the help (where wanted) of external experts. Ron Finley of Los Angeles (<https://ronfinley.com/>) has led the charge on such efforts to “turn food deserts into food sanctuaries”, but Central Texas has long had people working on related efforts. Now is the time to for local authorities to provide the resources to give these pioneers a chance to launch this approach on a big scale, using some of Austin’s advantages.

Some of those Austin advantages are:

- Heritage of agriculture – most people have farmers in their ancestry only a generation or two back
- Interaction with local farming
- Community garden system
- Sustainable Food Center and allied groups already established
- Good agricultural land in most parts of the area with disadvantaged populations
- Progressive government
- Prosperous general community

Here’s what the approach looks like when it works:

- Productive projects where each person has authority and reaps the benefits of their own work
- Significant impact on food availability and knowledge
- Cooperative rather than competitive dynamic — each success makes success by others more likely
- Intergenerational — grandparents supply knowledge, children gain knowledge