

# Fighting the Hartford Food Desert

A research project by Isabelle Moore

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Community partner: Billings Forge Community Works in Hartford, CT.

## Abstract

The **purpose** of my research was to **observe and evaluate** a community run food access focus group with the intention of providing my community partner with a **report** on the preliminary success of the project.

I found that the program was positively received by one hundred percent of survey respondents, and by the third meeting each participant could give a specific example of something they learned about improving their access to food.

The proposed solutions include **actions** that can be taken by individual residents, by the community, and by the government.

I was inspired to take on this project after spending my Spring Break working on an urban organic farm in the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans. Throughout the week I learned about how **food access** is directly related to **social justice** and **economic equality**.

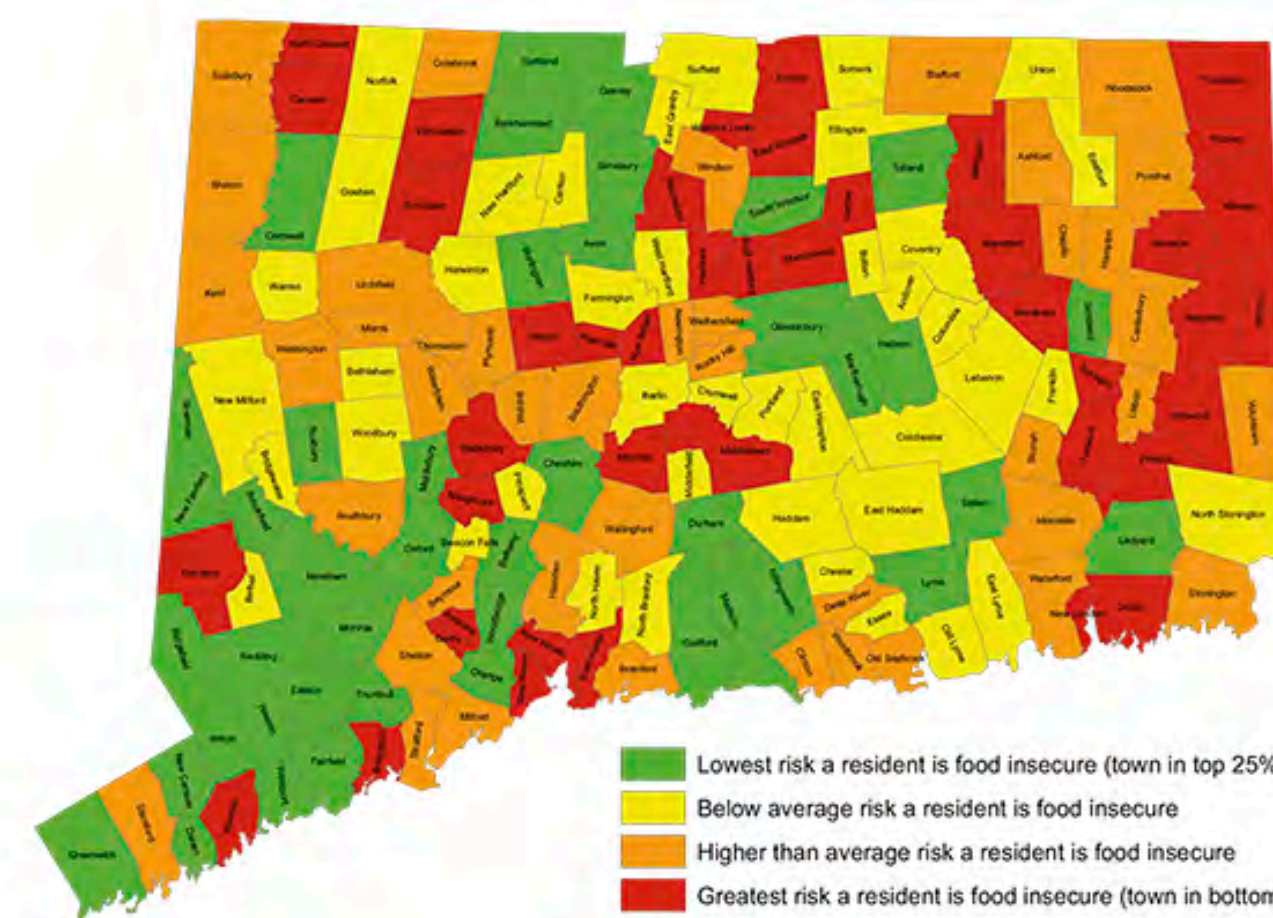
When I returned to Hartford I decided that I wanted to learn more about the food system located in Trinity's neighborhood.

## About food deserts and Billings Forge

- Food deserts are areas where "access to fresh [produce] is especially limited."

- According to a 2013 Hartford Food Systems report, approximately **300,000 Hartford residents** (nearly 1 in 4 people) are living in a food desert.

Programs exist in inner cities to mitigate the issue of food desertification through the creation of farmers markets and urban gardens. One such program is **Billings Forge Community Works (BFCW)**, located in the Frog Hollow neighborhood of Hartford, CT.



Population At-Risk Ranking: Measure the likelihood a resident is at risk for food insecurity. "2012 Food Security in Connecticut" from University of Connecticut College of Agriculture and Natural Resources

Billings Forge mission statement:

"**Billings Forge Community Works (BFCW)** is a driving force for community participation and empowerment in Frog Hollow through promoting access to healthy food; engaging youth; and developing employment opportunities and economically sustainable social enterprises."

The BFCW Community Circle (CC) program was launched in the fall of 2015 and modeled after the Lawrence Massachusetts NeighborCircles program. The purpose of the CC is to engage the residents and inspire solutions to community issues through a series of discussions. Billings Forge will support 8-10 Community Circle topics over the next year. Each topic incorporates three different discussion meetings over the course of three consecutive weeks.

## Methods

I utilized qualitative methods, including **participant observations** of

- All three Community Circle meetings
- Two preliminary planning meetings (Family Clubhouse)

As well as **two surveys** that were given anonymously to participants after the **first** and **last** Community Circle meetings.

**Survey 1: Monday November 16, 2015** – (Six responses of 10 participants)

- Why did you come to this Community Circle?
- Did you learn something? If so, what?
- Will you attend another Community Circle?

**Survey 2: Monday November 30<sup>th</sup>, 2015** – (Eight responses of 14 participants)

- What are some specific examples of things you learned during these meetings that would change your eating or shopping habits?
- What are some solutions you'll tell your friends about?

## Results

My part in this research was to evaluate the food action Community Circles using **metrics** determined by the designers of the program. Here are those metrics and my assessment of their impact:

1) Participants come to all three sessions	*
2) Participants learn about the topic	Yes
3) Participants develop specific action as a result of the meeting	Yes
4) Participants increase understanding of how to effect change in the community	Yes
5) Participants show interest by participating in another circle within one year	N/A
6) Ideas for Community Circles that are requested from the neighborhood	Yes**
7) Participants who are interested in additional leadership training	N/A

\*Because I de-identified all my field notes, I did not keep track of individual attendance. I did notice many returners, and the number of participants from the first week to the last meeting jumped from 8 to 14 (57% increase.)

\*\*Again, I did not measure this. However the Community Circle topics were chosen based on the results of a community survey given to BFCW residents and neighbors in the summer of 2015 and the data is available to me.

Metric No.2: "Participants learn about the topic"

This word cloud is made up of words participants used in their responses to the survey question: "what are some solutions you'll tell your friends about?"



The more commonly a word appears in a response, the bigger it appears in the word cloud. You can see that answers relating to:

- Batch cooking
- Foodshare
- Community

were among the most popular solutions discussed.

Metric No.3: "Participants develop specific action as a result of the meeting"

- "A lot of us are facing very similar situations [in terms of low food access.] –Participant
- "It's nice to have a discussion, but you have to go a little further." –Participant

"**Bit-a-soup**" or "**Grandma Soup**" is one time-honored, cultural solution to the issue of having too many odd leftovers and not enough money to buy new food. Many of the participants' grandmothers would make an "end of month" or "whatever soup." This popular solution incorporates buying and cooking in bulk so as to reduce cost and increase yield.

Metric No.4: "Participants increase understanding of how to effect change in the community"

- "I should be mindful of people with limited mobility to see if I can bring them things from the grocery store when I can." –Participant
- Another participant learned that "people in [the] community share the same ups and downs about money, food, and not having enough." –Participant
- "I learned that people are ready and willing to be active participants in the challenges they feel every day." –Participant

Metric No.6: "Ideas for Community Circle that are requested from the Neighborhood"

According to a Summer 2015 survey, here is what respondents cite as the "3 greatest problems or needs of this neighborhood":

- |                            |                     |                                 |
|----------------------------|---------------------|---------------------------------|
| • Safety                   | • Shooting          | • Homelessness                  |
| • Selling drugs            | • Gangs             | • Poverty                       |
| • Street violence          | • Schools           | • Mental Health                 |
| • Crime                    | • Roads/Sidewalks   | • Discrimination                |
| • Litter/garbage           | • Noise             | • Not enough programs for youth |
| • Traffic/speeding/parking | • Unemployment/jobs |                                 |

Notice that "**food access**" is not one of the requested topics of Community Circle discussion. The CC program is designed to talk about a multitude of different issues. Food access was chosen to be the first topic by the CC program designers because it was considered "**low risk**."

## Proposed Solutions

I found that the solutions proposed by Community Circle participants could be broken down into three levels of action:

Individual Level (Actions taken by residents)	Community Level (Actions taken by Billings Forge)	Institutional Level (Actions taken by the government)
Meal planning & Shopping	Ride shares to grocery store	Phone & letter writing campaign to representatives
Batch Cooking	Increase awareness of benefits	
Communicate better with neighbors	Increase Farmers Market hours	Coordinate with food providers

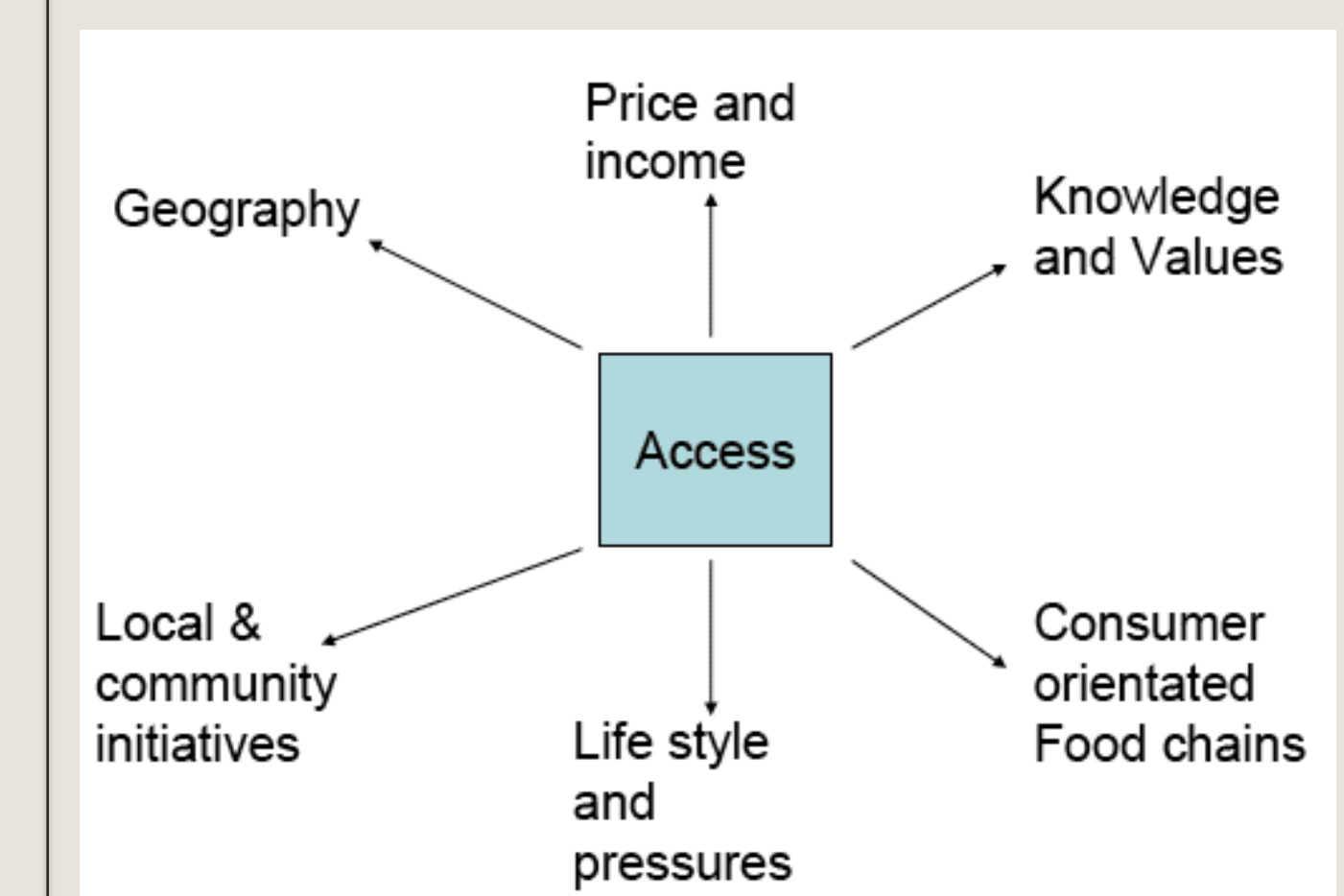
Among these solutions, the leaders of the focus group emphasized the importance of doing what they can to mitigate food insecurity using local, community based methods with the resources they have now.

## Discussion

The BFCW Community Circle is based on the Lawrence Community Works NeighborCircles program that boasts "**Good food, Good Conversation and Good Connection.**" The conversation is composed of three meetings:

- Introduction to the topic
- Sharing of personal experience with the topic
- Solution brainstorming

This proves to be a very adaptable approach. Lawrence Community Works has responded to demands and shared the design with other organizations and programs across the country, now including Billings Forge.



My project builds on a substantial basis of research in similar community building programs that aim to improve food access across the country. This kind of work has not yet been done in Hartford or with Billings Forge. In that way my project may serve as a case study that adds to the present body of community based research.

This figure shows how complex the issue of access is and how it hinges on "a lot of different things." –CC Participant

## References

- "2012 Food Security in Connecticut" from University of Connecticut College of Agriculture and Natural Resources
- March 2013 City of Hartford Advisory Commission on Food Policy "Recommendations Point the Way to Increase Food Security in Hartford."
- The Scottish Government "Food Affordability, Access and Security: Their Implications for Scotland's Food Policy - A Report by Work Stream 5 of the Scottish Government's Food Forum"
- Lawrence Community Works website "About NeighborCircles"

## Acknowledgments

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