

Food for Health

Building a Healthy Food System for Windham



Adapted by Everyday Democracy from *Food for Health: Building a Healthy Food System for NYC* (a guide edited by Lisa Sharon Harper, New York Faith & Justice)



Introduction

THE ISSUE

Meet Maria. Maria is a single mother of three children – 2, 4 and 7. Today she took her youngest child to a nanny at 5am before starting work on the farm. Her other two children were sent to school. After work, Maria was very tired and the kids were hungry. She wanted to cook something for dinner, but opening the kitchen pantry she saw that they were down to the last crumbs. She then opened the refrigerator, which was empty. Food is scarce and she is still days away from receiving her payment. Maria thinks to herself, "Hopefully the day will come when I can purchase healthier food, but for now I have to decide between going to the grocery store that is 5 miles away or going to the fast food chain or convenience stores two blocks away that are cheaper. I still have to pay rent, utilities, childcare, and other expenses. I just wish I could give my children something better. "

Maria is like many other low-income families who receive food stamps. 29.8% of all Windham residents are currently receiving food stamps while 78% of our local children are eligible for Free and Reduced Lunch. 24.7% of people in Windham live in poverty and 40.5% of children live in poverty in Willimantic alone.



BUILDING A HEALTHY FOOD SYSTEM FOR WINDHAM

In the U.S., unequal access to food and the many ways this can make it hard to stay healthy have been big problems for many years. Today, however, citizens of Windham have an opportunity to work together to make it easier to get healthy food and to improve the economic well-being of our community. The Windham Community Food Network is an alliance of diverse community members, farmers, businesses, agencies, and partners who are building relationships, sharing ideas, and developing project plans that address food and health gaps in Windham. Our mission is to “create opportunities for the community by building a healthy food network.” The health of all of us as individuals affects the health of our entire community. We hope you will join us in building this network.

Many things lead to unequal access to healthy food and resulting health-related problems, including:

1. Personal food choices and habits
2. Systems that make it difficult to get healthy food
3. Poverty
4. Historic and current day racism

People from different backgrounds or experiences often view these issues in different ways. Finding common ground for solutions can be hard. Most of the time, people who see things differently don't take the time to talk to each other, much less work together.

OUR PROCESS: WHAT IS A DIALOGUE-TO-CHANGE PROGRAM?

The dialogue-to-change process brings all kinds of people together to share different views and experiences. In the process, they begin to build stronger relationships and work together to find collective solutions. We believe this is necessary for long-term change to occur. These community dialogues are a key step among many that community members, faith leaders, advocates, and government representatives will take together as we build a healthy food system for all of Windham!

People from all over town will meet in dialogue circles. A dialogue circle is a group of about 10 people from different backgrounds and viewpoints who meet over the course of several sessions to talk about an issue. In a dialogue circle, everyone has an equal voice, and people try to understand each other's views. They do not have to agree with each other. The idea is to share concerns and look for ways to make things better in ways that benefit everyone. A trained facilitator helps the group focus on different views and makes sure the discussion goes well and stays on track. This person is not necessarily an expert on the issue.

All the dialogue circles work on the same issue, and seek solutions for the whole community. As a result, people from many backgrounds form new networks in order to work together. They create common ground and identify ways they can take action for themselves, in small groups, or as part of a larger effort.



Agenda

Day 1 - February 28th 2015 10:00am – 2:00pm

10:00 – 10:30 Registration

10:30 – 10:45pm Opening (Large Group)

Welcome / Why We're Here Today

1. To build relationships across barriers and learn from each other
2. To better understand why unequal access to food and good health is an important issue for everyone
3. To explore different views and approaches to change on the issue
4. To find common ground and create community based solutions

Setting Ground Rules

1. Every voice is equal.
2. Listen to one another. Treat each other with respect.
3. Each person gets a chance to talk.
4. One person at a time. Don't cut people off.
5. Speak for yourself. Don't try to speak for "your group."
6. It's OK to disagree. If you feel upset, say so and say why.
7. Stick to the issue.
8. No name-calling.
9. If you talk about people who are not here, don't say their names.
10. Some of what we talk about will be very personal. We will not tell these stories to other people, unless we all say it is OK.
11. Help the facilitator keep things on track.



10:45 – 12:00 (Small Groups)

Session 1: Who Are We? What is Our Vision for a Healthy Food System in Windham?

Goals of this session:

- Get to know each other.
- Review discussion guidelines.
- Talk about what “food for health” means to each of us, and to our community.
- Talk about our vision for a healthy community.

Introductions (10 minutes)

Does anyone have questions about the discussion guidelines? Are there any other guidelines you would like to add to the list?

- **Each person:** Say your name. *Why did you come today?*
- Where do you live? Tell us a little about your neighborhood.
- What is your favorite food – healthy or unhealthy?

Part One: What is my connection to the issue? (25 minutes)

- Draw your typical dinner plate on the paper plate provided. Talk about these questions.
 - What do you eat? When do you eat? Who do you eat with?
 - What can we see about your life by looking at your dinner plate?
 - How does your family or culture influence what you eat?
- Where do you get food in your neighborhood? Is it healthy, fresh and affordable? Where do you think your food comes from?
- Describe a time when you or someone close to you struggled with a connection between their diet and their health.

Part Two: Our Vision for a Healthy Community (30 mins)

1. Imagine a place where all of the people of Windham can access the food they need to thrive. Maybe it looks like a place where we live. Maybe it looks like another place you have visited or heard about.



2. In groups of three or four, talk about your ideal community. What do you see, hear, smell, and feel? How would you describe it? Think about families, children, play, and work. Also think about community health, individual health, and access to food. Draw a picture of it.
3. Come up with three or four words or phrases that describe your healthy community.
4. Return to the whole group. Share your pictures, words and phrases.
 - a. Which pictures and ideas are alike? Which ones are different?
 - b. How could we combine our ideas to make one vision?
 - c. How would a healthy food system help us build a healthy community?

Wrap-Up (10 mins)

1. What did you learn in this session?
2. What stories touched you or surprised you?
3. What do you hope we can accomplish together?
4. Any concerns?

12:00 – 12:30 Lunch

12:30 – 2:00 (Small Groups)

Session 2: What is at the Root of the Problem?

Introduction

In Session One, we talked about our personal connection to food, history, and health. We also talked about our vision for a healthy community and a healthy food system. In this session, we will talk about what the food and health gaps look like in our neighborhoods. We will also discuss a range of views to help us explore the roots of the problem. This will help us develop action ideas in later sessions.

Part One: Getting Started (5 mins)

Review the ground rules. Do changes need to be made?

Our facilitator will review the notes from Session One and sum up the main ideas from that discussion. This will help us to be ready for our work today.



Part Two: Discussion Questions on the Information Sheet (20 mins)

The "information sheet" provides information to help us understand what the food and health gaps look like in Windham. Use these questions to talk about the data:

1. When you look at the information, what stands out? Why?
2. Does anything surprise you? Why?
3. What overall themes and trends do you see?
4. Who is affected by the food and health gap?

Part Three: Exploring the Food and Health Gap in Windham (60 mins)

People have different ideas about the situation. One view cannot tell the whole story. We may agree with each other on some points, and disagree on others. That is OK.

Each of the eight views stated here is in the voice of a person who thinks it is a very important idea. As you read the views, think about these questions.

- Are these the kinds of things people are saying in our community?
- Which views come closest to your own way of thinking? Why?
- Which views seem most important?
- Is there a view you would like to add?
- Do some of these views surprise you? Why?
- Is there anything that you don't agree with?
- Given our vision, which views are most important to work on?

Views

1. People are making bad personal choices.

We are responsible for our own food choices. If we decide to eat unhealthy foods, we are causing our own health problems.

2. Certain neighborhoods have more healthy food options than others.

Not everyone has equal access to healthy, local and affordable food. This results in unhealthy eating habits, obesity, and diet-related diseases. Poverty can lead to both hunger and obesity, because cheaper foods often have more fat and less nutritional value.



3. There is a lack of education about healthy food.

Some do not have education about healthy food options and how to prepare healthy meals. Also, people might not know about low-cost healthy food options. If more people were made aware of how to budget for healthier food, they would be able to afford it.

4. There is a stigma around receiving help.

It can be embarrassing to receive food stamps and other government help. The process of enrollment is demeaning and people look down on others who receive this kind of help. So, a lot of people reject the idea of seeking help altogether.

5. Historical and current day racism contributes to unequal access to healthy food.

Some people have faced centuries of racism. They may have been legally barred from purchasing land or growing their own food. They may not have been able to go to college. Some people have even been forced to leave their own countries. They have been denied basic rights that lead to economic opportunity. As a result, these communities have been forced to live in underdeveloped neighborhoods with limited access to healthy food.

6. People don't know about the options they have. Government often fails to educate people about the food and health options available to them.

Government doesn't do a good job of letting low-income people know about the benefits they can receive. Programs such as food stamps, cash assistance, and free school breakfasts are underutilized. Also, many people who could qualify for food stamps such as the elderly, Spanish-language speakers, the disabled, and those who are seriously ill may not have either the help or the time they need to negotiate the system.

7. Some people connect their unhealthy food choices to their culture and tradition.

Traditional foods hold a lot more meaning than just a meal. They can mean family, tradition, and cultural connection. In their home countries, the food may have been cooked in a healthy way, but in the United States those same foods tend to be filled with fat, carbohydrates, sugar, and salt.

8. Fast food and factory farms have more government support than small farms and local producers.

Because much of our state and federal taxes go to large food corporations, healthy, local and organic options are more expensive. Local farmers are struggling to get by and the Windham economy suffers.



Wrap-Up (5 mins)

Turn to your neighbor. Discuss the following:

- How did the session go?
- What views do we agree about? What views do we not agree about?
- What themes keep coming up in our discussion?
- How do you feel going home after today's discussion?

Homework/Preview for Next Dialogue:

For our meeting next weekend, reflect on the work we did today.

- Ask others about why they think it can be hard for some of our neighbors to get healthy food.
- Ask other people what they think we should do about it.



Day 2 – March 7th 2015 10:00am – 2:00pm

10:00 – 11:30am (Small Groups)

Session 3: Approaches to Building a Healthy Food System for All

Introduction

In Session Two, we talked about why unequal access to healthy food is a problem in our community. Now, we will talk about how we can start to make it easier for everyone to get healthy food. In the next session, we will talk about specific action ideas.

Part One: Getting Started (10 mins)

1. Do a brief round of introductions. Please tell us your name and how you're feeling this morning.
2. Review the Ground Rules. Ask for any additions.
3. Brief sharing: what we did last week, thoughts on what we learned.

Part Two: Approaches to Change (60 mins)

We've talked about how our community is doing. Now, we will explore some ways to improve things. What approaches will work well? What will help us deal with the food and health gap? What can we accomplish within one year?

Use these questions to think about the different approaches:

1. Which approaches do you like and why?
2. Are there other approaches would you like to add?
3. How will these ideas help address the food and health gap across our community?
4. What approaches might we be able to help move forward because they already have traction in Windham?
5. What doubts to you have? Concerns? What makes you say that?



Approaches

1. Increase access to healthy affordable foods.

Healthy food needs to be available in the communities where people live, shop and work. Too many people in Windham live in “food deserts”, where healthy food is not available or costs too much.

Here are some ideas of how we might do this:

- More farmers’ markets, food coops, or community-supported agriculture projects (CSAs).
- More supermarkets in poor neighborhoods.
- Expansion of Food Stamps (SNAP) and lower barriers of enrollment.

2. Decrease promotion of—and access to—unhealthy foods.

The availability of foods with high fat, sugar, and calories contributes to obesity, heart disease and diabetes. It is important that we work together to limit access to the foods that cause diet-related diseases.

Here are some ideas of how we might do this:

- Restrictions on food advertising to children.
- Limit the number of fast food outlets in neighborhoods.
- Reward use of government assistance to purchase healthy foods.

3. Focus on children.

We can offer children healthier diets to help prevent obesity and other food-related health problems. This can also help children do better in school and establish lifetime healthy habits.

Here are some ideas of how we might do this:

- Better quality school food.
- School-based community gardens to grow their own fruits and vegetables.
- Support a group of youth leaders who can organize and educate other youth.



4. Educate people about the benefits of eating healthy food.

Outreach and education by community groups and faith-based organizations can provide the support and creative ideas many individuals need to commit to a healthy lifestyle.

Here are some ideas of how we might do this:

- Organize cooking classes that incorporate healthy versions of traditional and culturally appropriate meals.
- Offer health education classes offered in faith communities and community centers.
- “Food and health” media campaigns.

5. Take personal responsibility to make healthy food choices for yourself and your family.

Lifestyle changes and lifelong eating habits can only come from personal commitment. We can all take action to choose healthier food for our families and ourselves and to model healthy eating for our children.

Here are some ideas of how we might do this:

- Eat a healthy balanced diet.
- Take vending machines out of church and school buildings and offices.
- Start a walking club.

6. Build a strong food workforce.

The food industry is one of the biggest employers in the nation. Farmers, food service workers, checkout clerks, and other workers in the food industry should earn a living wage. Also, all of us benefit when people working in the food industry understand how good nutrition promotes health and are given the skills to grow and prepare safe and healthy food.

Here are some ideas of how we might do this:

- Support supermarkets and bodegas that pay a living wage and offer benefits to their workers.
- Support supermarkets and bodegas that prepare their food workers for management positions.
- Advocate that supermarkets receiving town or state benefits should be required to hire a percentage of their workers from the neighborhood.



7. Encourage investment in local farms and businesses.

Windham has a number of important assets that can support a healthy food system while also boosting the economy. Some of these are the food coop, farmers market, and the new cooperative kitchen (CLiCK). We can encourage residents to invest in food grown in Windham, Windham businesses and other institutions that support a healthy food system. We can build systems that send the money back to our community.

Here are some ideas of how we might do this:

- Build partnerships between local merchants, farmers and community members.
- Encourage support for bodegas, supermarkets and institutions that sell local and healthy products.
- Educate residents about budgeting to use food stamps at farmers markets and the food coop.
- Create a newsletter to advertise all local services and events related to healthy food.

8. Address racism in our community.

Racism hurts everyone and keeps some people in poverty. It affects access to food, health, jobs, housing and schooling. African Americans, Asian Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, and others face racism and unfairness everyday. We must end the practice of racism by people and institutions to ensure access to healthy food for all Windham residents.

Here are some ideas of how we might do this:

- Increase Spanish translation services in Windham, so that people can receive the health and food services they need.
- Educate the community about the connection between racism, access to healthy food, and individual health.
- Build partnerships between families from different cultures. Create opportunities for people to learn from each other and connect each other to community events and services.

Wrap-Up (20 mins)

1. What good things are we already doing? How can we build on these?
2. What else will help us make progress? What problems will we face?
3. What action ideas should we make sure we come back to in Session 4?

Lunch 11:30-12:00



Session 4: Moving to Action. What Can We Do? (1.5 hours)

Goals:

- Review the action ideas that came up in Session 3.
- Talk about the assets we have in our community.
- Choose a small number of action ideas we can get started on.
- Prepare for the Action Forum.

Part One: Community Assets Brainstorm (15 mins.)

Every community has strengths or assets. Assets can be people, places, or organizations. They are things that we have or use to help ourselves and each other. Every group and every person has them.

Talking about our assets:

1. What are some things you know a lot about?
2. What are some of the talents or skills we have in this group? How about other people in the community?
3. What groups do you belong to? How can they help?
4. What groups in the community affect those who have trouble getting healthy food? How can they help?
5. What assets do we have—like land, buildings, tools or even money?

COMMUNITY ASSETS

People	Places	Institutions/ Organizations	Other	



Part Two: Brainstorm Action Ideas (20 mins.)

Turn to your neighbor. Together, think about the approaches discussion. Were there action ideas that you think would work well in our town? Are there other action ideas that weren't listed? Try to come up with specific actions that fit with the approaches we think will work best. How many different ideas can we come up with?

Make a list of action ideas in the following categories:

Things that you can do on your own	Things you can do with other small groups of people	New Partnerships, collaborations, or projects	New Policies	Institutional change

Part Three: Connect Action Ideas with Assets (10 mins)

Post list of action ideas beside the assets, and talk about which ones can be linked. Keep these connections in mind as we prioritize our action ideas.

Part Four: Set Priorities for Action (40 mins)

Look at our list of ideas for action. Now we are going to narrow it down to a few ideas to take to the action forum where people from all the discussion groups will meet to share their ideas.

These questions will help us set priorities for action:

- Which ideas can be combined?
- Which ideas are easiest to get done?
- Who would work with us on these ideas?
- Which ideas might do the most good?
- Which ideas might have a long-term impact?



- As a group, choose two or three ideas that are important and doable. Each person will receive three green dots and one red dot.
 - Please place the three green dots on the action ideas you believe we need to do within the next 6 months to 1 year.
 - Place the red dot on the action idea we definitely should not do within the next 6 months to 1 year.

- Write the top two or three ideas on a flip chart labeled Priority Action Ideas.

- Then, consider the following questions:
 - What would it take to make this happen?
 - What community assets could we use to move this idea forward?
 - What kind of support do we need to take these steps? Who else could we link up with?
 - How do we begin?

1:30 - 2:00pm Wrapping Up—Next Steps (Large Group)

Thank you for taking part in these dialogue-to-change circles. Before you leave, we'd like to go over some of what you probably heard in your small groups about next steps, especially the Action Forum. At this event, people will pool the ideas you generated today, pick a few of the best ideas and make plans for action. Action teams form to move these ideas forward. There will be many ways for people to stay involved.

In short, you are making a big difference in our community. Let's sum up:

1. What has surprised you?
2. Have you changed your mind about these issues? If so, how?
3. How will you stay involved with this effort?
4. Is there anything you will do differently because you took part in these talks?