

ISSUE REPORT

Investing In America's Health:

A STATE-BY-STATE LOOK AT PUBLIC HEALTH
FUNDING AND KEY HEALTH FACTS



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PREVENTION IN ACTION

Dane County: Linking Our Local Food System with the Health of our Community

By Carrie Edgar, Department Head and Community Food Systems Educator, Dane County UW Extension

Dane County UW-Extension has a long history of working with the farmers who raise our food and the consumers who purchase it. However, through Community Food Systems work, we have broadened that goal to ensure our local food system encompasses all members of the community (rural and urban) and has public health and prevention as a priority. This shift has coincided with the local food movement.

In Dane County, which includes Madison, Wisconsin, we are lucky to have a diverse agriculture system. Along with conventional row crop farming, we have many fruit and vegetable farms, Community Supported Agriculture farms, and livestock and dairy farms. We also have multiple farmers markets and in fact, our Dane County Farmer's Market is the largest producer-only market in the country.

Still, when we took a step back and looked at the entire community, we realized not everyone had access to fresh, locally grown food. Solving this type of disparity became a priority and many members of the community, including local government, took up the issue. Some of the most notable improvements have been the development of school and community gardens, implementation of farm to school programs and the expansion of farmers markets.

In an effort to provide place-based education, Dane County UW-Extension nutrition educators set-up displays at farmers markets to talk to people about what produce is in-season and inexpensive and to provide cooking demonstrations. Often, we find that people are interested in using fresh ingredients but thought they were too expensive or didn't know how to prepare them. The nutrition educators are often stationed at markets near public health clinics and help people understand that they can use their Women, Infant and Children (WIC) coupons and EBT card for food benefits at the farmers market.

Extension also works closely with schools and other organizations to help create and maintain school gardens. We use school gardens as classrooms to teach students about gardening,

nutrition and other important life skills. Our goal is to have a garden at every school in the county. Extension staff were founding members of the GROW Coalition that supports school and parent organizations that are interested in outdoor education with a strong emphasis on nutrition and getting kids outside and active.

Since 2005 the Dane County Food Council, a committee of citizens and County Board Supervisors, has led the mission to explore issues and develop recommendations to create an economically, socially and environmentally sustainable local food system for Dane County. They have advocated for policies and supported the development of programs within the county such as the Institutional Food Marketing (IFM) Coalition. The Coalition started in 2006 to link farmers with schools, hospitals and other institutions to help them source local food. We found many organizations want to purchase locally grown food, however they didn't have the channels to do so efficiently. IFM connects farmers with the institutions, improving the farmer's business and the health of the community members these organizations employ, teach and serve. To our knowledge, this is the only County operated coalition of its kind that exists in the United States and it has had tremendous success. IFM generated more than \$1.5 million in local wholesale food sales in 2010 helping to create or retain 29 jobs in the area.

We are also working to address barriers in the community food system that have been identified including lack of infrastructure and farmer access to land. One of these new projects is the development of a food hub (produce packing house) where locally grown produce can be aggregated, packed and sold to local distributors and institutions. We are also working with the Dane County Parks Department on ways to make county owned land available to beginning farmers to raise food.

In Dane County, we are working to help every member of the community stay healthy and be active, so our community can thrive. By engaging with people at various levels, we ensure healthy foods and information is available to all who want to live healthier and more active lives.