

A network diagram with purple and green nodes connected by thin lines, forming a web-like structure in the top left corner.

# IMAGINING FUTURE

# FOOD SYSTEMS

**Report DEC 2025**

*Understanding the community's vision for a better food system in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.*



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HANNAH TRASSER, LEE VALENTYN



# IMAGINING FUTURE FOOD SYSTEMS

October 2024-September 2025

*This material was funded in part by USDA's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program – Education (SNAP-Ed). This institution is an equal opportunity provider.*

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to all Participants for contributing to the collective vision of a future food system in Milwaukee. Thank you for the time and expertise, critical questions, and sharing of resources.

## Community Partners

Thank you to the Community Partners who were integral to connecting with and organizing Milwaukee residents for these sessions:

- **Riverworks** - Ruth Weill
- **Nourish MKE** - Marquis Thorn & Jenna Koch
- **Westlawn Gardens** - Paul Williams & Sandy Short
- **A Cry for Help** - Bianca Williams
- **VIA CDC** - Kevin Solis
- **Rooted & Rising** - Adrian Spencer & Hannah Bessenecker
- **Kinship** - Travis Sternhagen
- **Urban Indigenous League** - Averie Anderson, Carla Jones, & Brian Harrison
- **Hmong American Women Association** - Vina Xiong & Youa Xiong
- Jerica Fehr & Andrew McKee
- **Muskego Way Forward** - Elizabeth Ramirez
- **Perseverance Health and Wellness** - Bridgett Wilder
- **Sherman Park Community Association** - Ifeoluwapo Tolorunju
- **Mujeres con Poder** - Alma Lopez, Angeles Soria, & Stephanie Calloway
- **Diverse & Resilient** - Jaylin Mitchell & Corey Clark
- **Walnut Way** - Bryan Rogers
- **Centers for Independence** - Erin Dentice
- **Tikkun Ha-Ir** - Brandice Kirchner & Sami Stein Avner
- **Hmong American Friendship Association** - Lue Vue & William Xiong

## Operational Partners

Other partners that made this work possible are:

- **UW-Madison Extension FoodWise** - support and capacity building for Lee Valentyn's role
- **UW-Milwaukee Institute for Systems Change & Peacebuilding** - hosting Lisa Yaj's role
- **City of Milwaukee Health Department** - support and capacity building for Hannah Trasser's role
- **Milwaukee Food Council** - support and capacity building for Jessica Thompson's role; providing meals for the sessions
- **UBUNTU Research & Evaluation** - thought partnership and evaluation
- **Feeding America Eastern Wisconsin** - fiscal agent support
- **Destrezas de Rubi** - Spanish interpretation services

Thank you to Solana Patterson-Ramos for her support of this initiative while in her role as the Executive Director of Milwaukee Food Council.

# PROJECT TEAM



## Jessica Thompson

MILWAUKEE FOOD COUNCIL  
**COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT MANAGER**

Jessica Thompson (she/her) is a dedicated advocate for equitable food systems and sustainable community development, currently serving as the Community Engagement Manager at the Milwaukee Food Council. With a Master's degree in Sustainable Peacebuilding from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, she combines academic insight with hands-on experience to advance community-led food justice initiatives.



## Lee Valentyn

UW-MADISON EXTENSION FOODWISE  
**HEALTHY FOOD SYSTEMS COORDINATOR**

Lee Valentyn (he/him/él) brings over a decade of organizing and neighborhood engagement to his work, most recently as Healthy Food Systems Coordinator in the FoodWise program at UW-Madison Division of Extension. Lee uses experience in collective action and systems thinking, applying an asset-based approach to support individuals and groups who seek to transform their communities.



## Lisa lab Yaj

UW-MILWAUKEE INSTITUTE FOR SYSTEMS CHANGE & PEACEBUILDING  
**GRADUATE PROJECT ASSISTANT**

Lisa lab Yaj (nws/they/she) is an assistant under the UW-Milwaukee's Institute of Systems Change & Peacebuilding. They supported the Imagining Future Food Systems process and led the development of this report. They also lead ongoing efforts to map Milwaukee's food system.



## Hannah Trasser

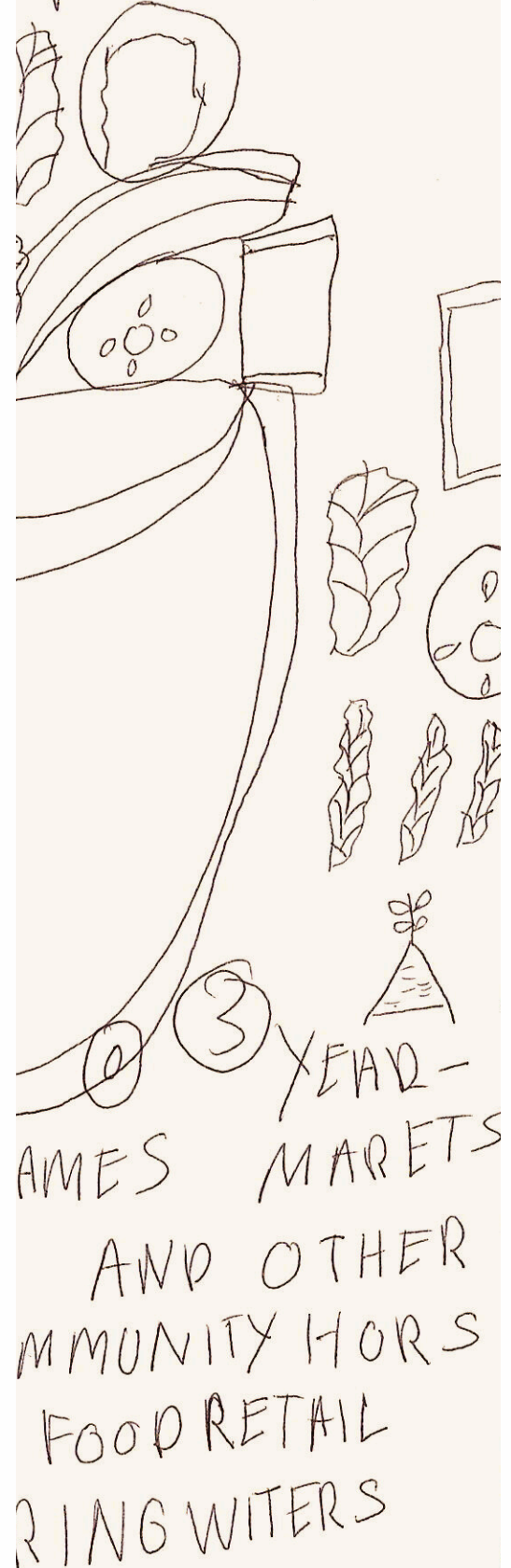
CITY OF MILWAUKEE HEALTH DEPARTMENT  
**PUBLIC HEALTH STRATEGIST**

Hannah Trasser (she/her) is a Public Health Strategist at the City of Milwaukee Health Department, where she focuses on advancing a more equitable food system in Milwaukee. With a Master's in Public Health from the University of Minnesota (Go Gophers!), she embraces this opportunity as a way to serve the Milwaukee community by fostering relationships that strengthen the local food system.

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S AND FRIDGES  
FOOD WAST



# INTRODUCTION

Imagining Future Food Systems was an initiative that engaged over 400 community members across 18 neighborhoods to shape a local food system that promotes social, economic, and environmental well-being.

Through 20 listening sessions over a 9-month period (October 2024 - June 2025), Milwaukee community members provided insights on food justice, community assets, and actionable steps toward a more equitable and sustainable food system.

The purpose of this initiative was to establish a long-term vision for the local food system grounded in community voice

## Framework

The following principles and objectives guided the listening sessions:

- **Those closest to the problem** are in the best position to solve it
- **Communities drive the work** of local food system change
- **Identify goals** and possible actionable steps
- **Determine community capacity** for long-term food system transformation



Imagining Future Food Systems lays the groundwork for a vision to transform Milwaukee's food system, aligned with the community's dreams, needs, & desires.

## External Influences

The circumstances and events below provide a glimpse into the external factors that influenced Milwaukee’s food system and, in turn, the data collected through this initiative during the October 2024 - September 2025 timeframe. The Project Team acknowledges that these external influences may have impacted the comments and reflections shared by Imagining Future Food Systems Participants.

### LOCAL

- Milwaukee Market Match & Fresh Food Access Fund uncertainty
- 5 Pick ‘n Save store closures
- Market Perks program pilot

### FEDERAL

- SNAP eligibility changes
- USDA hunger survey cancelation
- SNAP-Ed elimination
- Local Food Purchasing Assistance Program cancelation

### CLIMATE

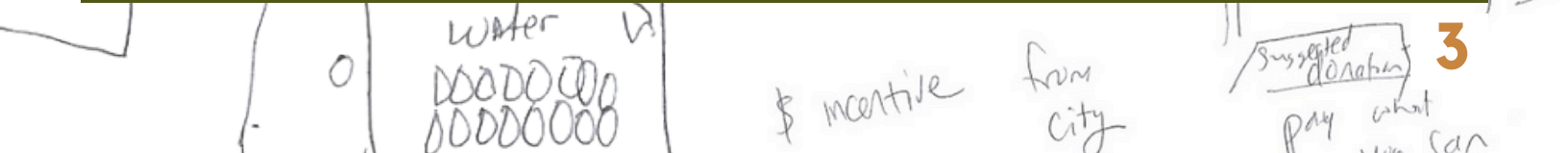
- Historic flooding in August 2025 impacting growing season



# PROCESS



This section describes the general process followed for this Initiative. Community Partners added to or adjusted the process with their own ideas for what would work best for the communities they worked with. These additions and adjustments included language accommodations, changes to the wording for questions, and additional community activities.



# PHASE 1: PLANNING

## Community Partner Recruitment

The Imagining Future Food Systems sessions were held across Milwaukee with the support of 19 Community Partners. The Project Team engaged in exploratory conversations with over 30 prospective partners, of which 19 committed to carrying out an Imagining Future Food Systems Session.

**Community Partners** were recruited throughout the project based on their extensive community ties. Partner recruitment evolved over the course of this initiative in order to target communities and demographics missing from the conversations and to build and maintain a relatively diverse participant base.

## Community Partner Responsibilities

Community Partners were compensated for their responsibilities, which included the following:

- **Securing a location for the session**
- **Participant recruitment**
- **Meal coordination**
- **Day-of logistical support**

Community Partners hosted sessions in spaces that best met their community's needs. Community Partners also communicated to the Project Team any accommodations that needed to be addressed to host a successful session, such as language barriers and accessibility needs. Four sessions accommodated language needs in Spanish, Hmong, and Karen.

# PHASE 2: IMPLEMENTATION

## Leading with Open Dialogue

Imagining Future Food Systems sessions began with a meal and reflection. As Participants entered the space, they shared a meal and reflected on the following terms:

**FOOD APARTHEID**  
**FOOD DESERT**

**NUTRITION SECURITY**  
**HUNGER**

**FOOD SECURITY**  
**FOOD SWAMP**

Participants were invited to share their thoughts, reflections, and questions for each term, regardless of prior knowledge. This open dialogue served to gauge how these terms are received by the community and stimulate thoughtful discussion with one another about the food system. Facilitators provided definitions for these terms upon request; see Appendix A for the general definitions facilitators provided.

## 1-2-4-All Conversation

After a brief presentation to introduce the Project Team and the Imagining Future Food Systems initiative, the remainder of the session utilized the Liberating Structures activity “1-2-4-All” to facilitate the following questions:

**WHAT DO YOU THINK OF WHEN YOU HEAR THE TERM  
“FOOD JUSTICE”?**

**WHAT IS A STORY YOU CARRY WITH YOU THAT INFORMS YOUR  
RELATIONSHIP TO FOOD, LAND, OR HOW WE ARRIVED IN THIS MOMENT  
IN OUR FOOD SYSTEM HISTORY?\***

*\*Presented by Community Food Navigator staff at Chicago Food Policy Action Council’s 2023 Food Justice Summit*

## 1-2-4-All Process\*

- 1 Participants chose which of the two reflection questions they preferred to focus on and gathered their thoughts and reflections on that question, writing down notes if desired.
- 2 Each participant paired up with another participant who focused on the same question. Pairs had two minutes to share their thoughts and reflections with one another.
- 4 Each pair was matched up with another pair that was focused on the same question, forming a group of four. These groups had four minutes to share their thoughts and reflections with one another.

**All** Each group of four shared their reflections (either individual reflections or themes that had arisen) with the larger group. Each group shared one reflection at a time. If time allowed, after each group had a chance to contribute reflections, facilitators invited Participants to provide final thoughts or reflections. One of the facilitators served as a notetaker, capturing all of the reflections in writing.

*\*Based on 1-2-4-All as described on Liberating Structures website. For more details about this process, visit <https://www.liberatingstructures.com/1-1-2-4-all/>.*

## PHASE 3: ANALYSIS

### Data Synthesis

Hosting 20 sessions produced a rich data set of participant comments that the Project Team sifted through. Following an initial review of the data, each comment from the sessions was grouped and then coded into larger themes. The most frequently mentioned and commonly discussed themes were identified as main themes.

From participant comments, the Project Team also derived a list of dreams that Participants had for the future food system.

These “Main Themes” and “Dreams” were summarized in documents that served as materials for Phase 4: Shareback Sessions. See Appendix B for these “Main Themes” and “Milwaukeean’s Dream of Having...” documents.

# PHASE 4: SHAREBACK

## Shareback Sessions

Five Community Partners hosted Shareback sessions. Participants of the 20 Imagining Future Food Systems sessions, Community Partners, and other community members were invited to participate. The purpose of these sessions was to ground-truth the Project Team’s findings, provide a forum for additional feedback, and begin to consider next steps to make the dreams for the food system in Milwaukee a reality.

Spanish/English interpretation was provided at two of the Shareback sessions.

Over 100 people attended Shareback sessions, which took place in September 2025. Approximately half of the Shareback Participants had attended one of the original Imagining Future Food Systems sessions. Throughout this report, feedback from the Shareback sessions has been incorporated into the data.

## Shareback Illustrations

Hand-drawn illustrations throughout this report, such as the one below, were created during Shareback sessions. Participants were asked to draw what it would look like to make Milwaukeean’s dreams for the local food system a reality.



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# PHASE 5: FINAL ANALYSIS

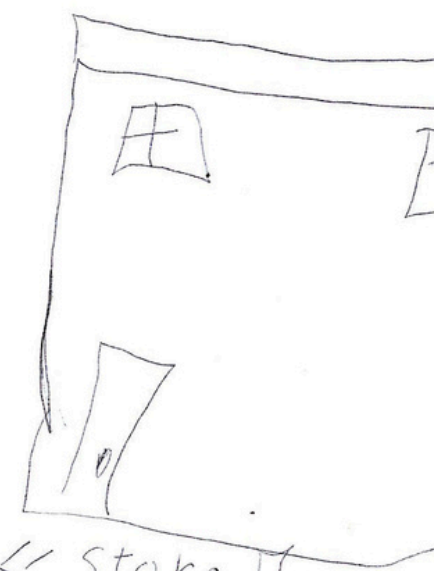
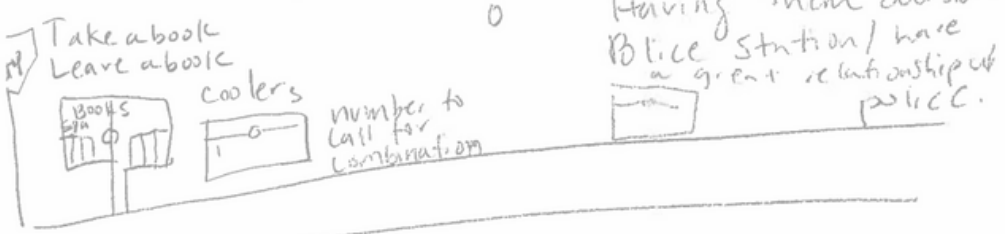
## Data Synthesis

Feedback from the Shareback sessions was used to update the data from the initial Imagining Future Food Systems sessions. Themes were updated, and Participants' dreams for the local food system were added. The final Main Themes can be found in the Results section of this report (page 16). The final list of Milwaukeeans' dreams for the local food system can be found in the Recommendations section of this report (pages 20-26).

Notes from specific feedback provided by Participants in the Shareback sessions can be found in Appendix C.



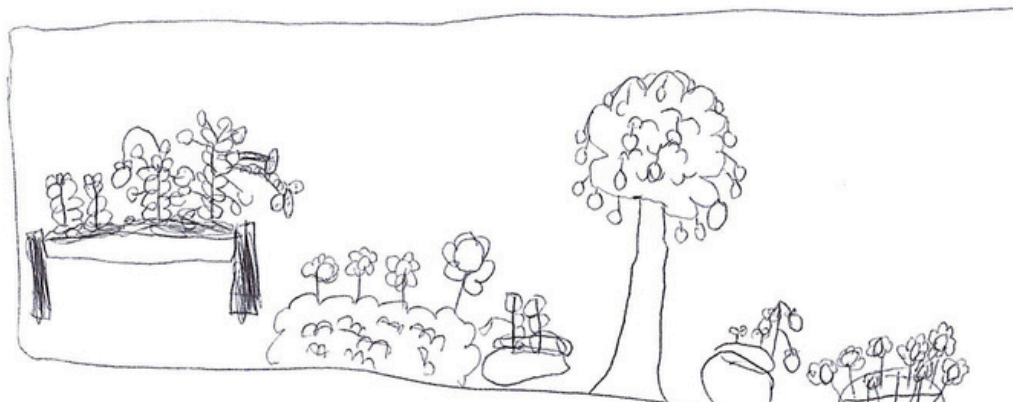
1.- Coolers or fridges next to free Library houses in the neighborhood.



# DEMOGRAPHICS



Comunicacion apoyo entre comunidades, union  
Deseo de crear cambios,



# NEIGHBORHOODS REACHED

WE COLLABORATED WITH  
**19 PARTNERS**

FACILITATING  
**20 SESSIONS**

TO ENGAGE  
**400+ NEIGHBORS**

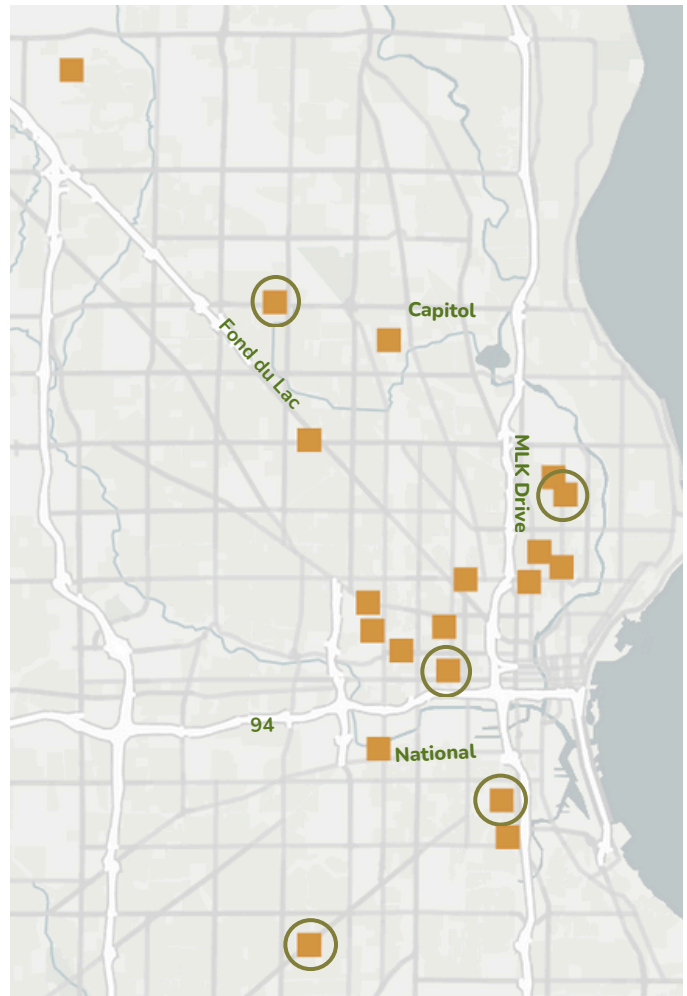
ACROSS  
**18 NEIGHBORHOODS**

## Neighborhoods

These neighborhoods reflect only where Imagining Future Food System (IFFS) and Shareback sessions took place. The demographics questionnaire did not ask Participants to identify the neighborhood where they lived.

- Harambee
- Riverwest
- Granville Station
- Silver City
- Washington Park
- Honey Creek Manor / Lyons Park\*
- Cold Spring Park / Concordia\*
- Westlawn Gardens
- Midtown
- Old North Milwaukee
- Historic Mitchell Street
- Grasslyn Manor / Sherman Park\*
- Lincoln Village
- Lindsay Heights
- Avenue West

*\*denotes adjacent neighborhoods - sessions took place where two neighborhoods meet*



This map shows where each session was hosted

- Location of initial IFFS session
- ⊙ Location of initial IFFS & Shareback session

# FOOD INSECURITY RATES

The following map and data outline the zip codes where sessions took place and their corresponding food insecurity rates. The Project Team acknowledges that people likely crossed zip codes to attend a session, and that people within these zip codes experience various levels of food insecurity.

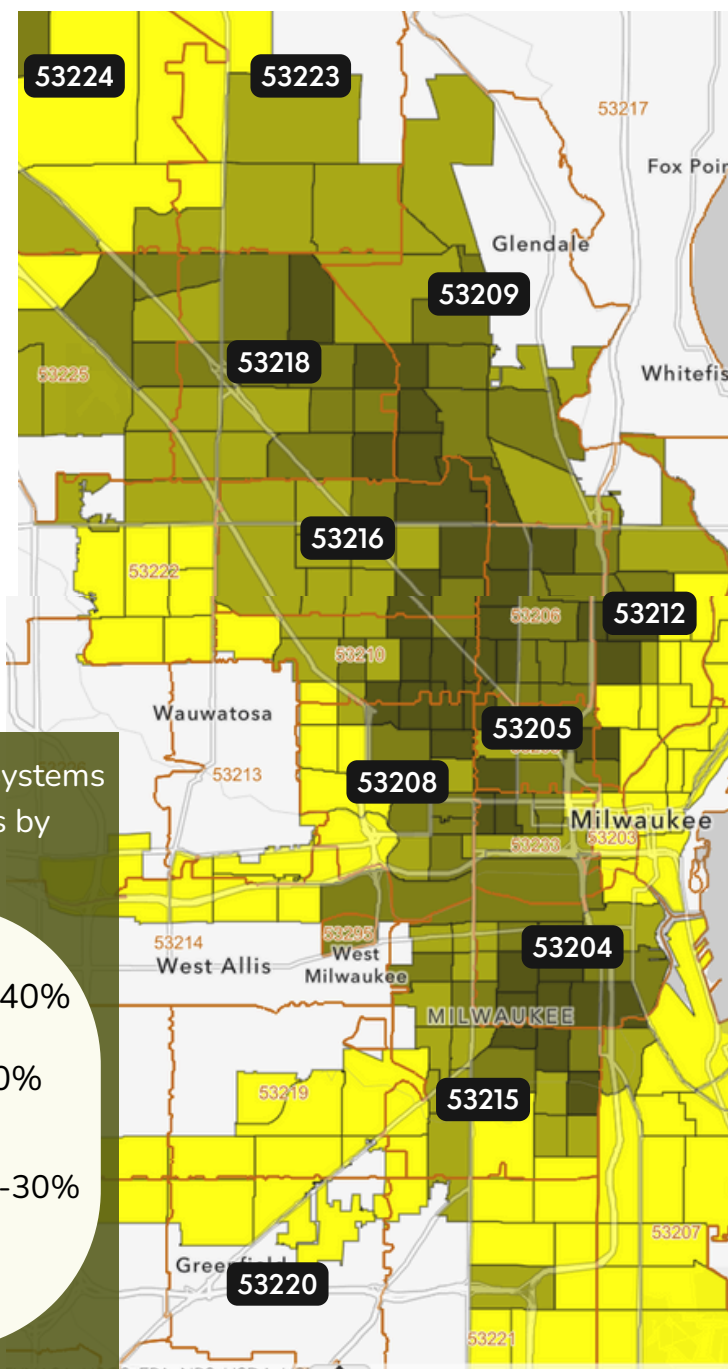
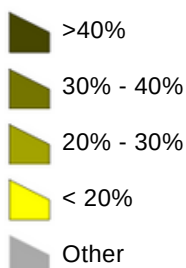
Neighborhood, ZIPcodes, and other boundaries

ZIP



Food Insecurity, 2022

Percent of the Population over 18 years old that reported being Food Insecure (%)



Zip codes of Imagining Future Food Systems sessions and food insecurity rates by percentage in those zip codes

53212 }  
53218 } >40%  
53215 }  
53208 }  
53204 }  
53216 }  
53205 }

53224 30-40%

53209 <20%

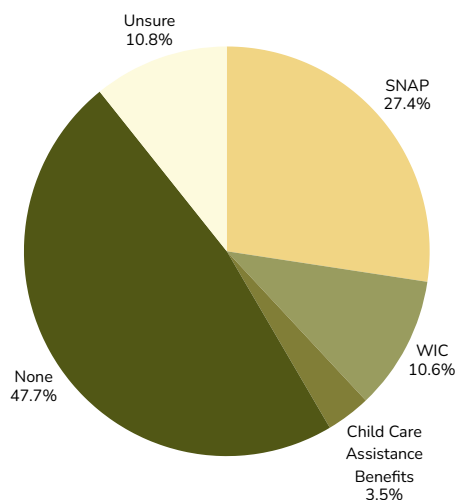
53220 }  
53233 } 20-30%

# QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS

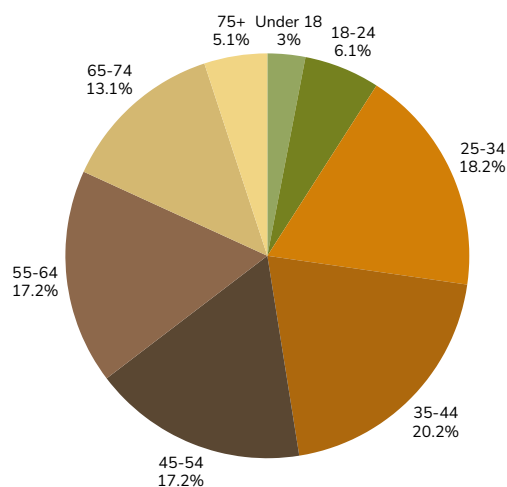
The Project Team developed a demographic questionnaire to identify which communities were being reached and which communities were missing from the conversations. The following pie charts show the demographics of Imagining Future Food Systems Participants who completed the questionnaire.

Out of 400 Participants, 75% responded to the questionnaire

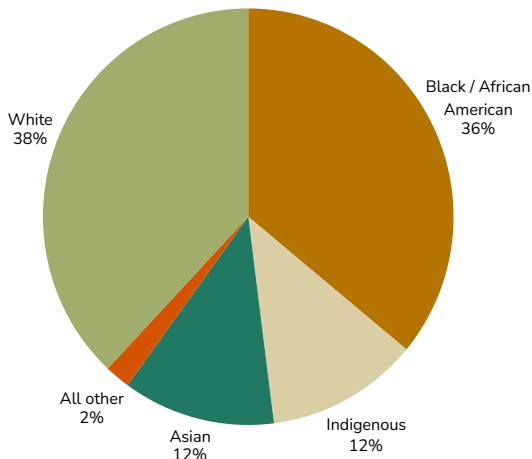
**BENEFITS QUALIFICATIONS**



**AGE**

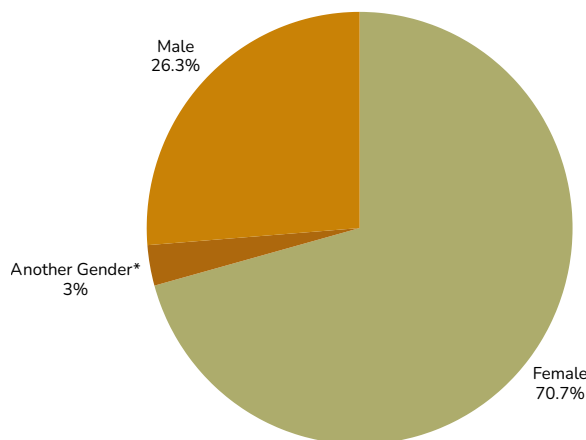


**RACE**



Ethnicity: 28% identified as Hispanic

**GENDER**



\*1.4% identified as transgender; 1.6% did not identify another gender

# WHO WAS IN THE ROOM?

The demographics questionnaire did not ask Participants how they were connected to food or the food system. However, when people shared their stories, they identified as...

- parents and guardians advocating for or concerned about school meals
- farmers' market and grocery store customers
- recipients of home delivery from food centers or groceries provided in group homes
- local grocers with produce and butcher networks
- growers
  - Black and Indigenous growers
- community garden leaders
- SNAP beneficiaries
- food pantry staff and volunteers
- elders with food preservation skills
- food system visionaries
- nutrition educators
- mutual aid participants
- individuals impacted by racism in the food and medical systems

## HOW ARE YOU OR YOUR COMMUNITIES CONNECTED TO FOOD?

Shareback session Participants asked for critical reflection on how to include people from all parts of our food system. They wanted to hear more about and from people who grow, process, and transport food; food truck and grocery workers; and others.

When we are building our food systems, this feedback asks us to attend to all parts of our systems—much like one needs to care for the entire body—through questions such as these:

- Who are the kidneys, filtering out waste?
- Who are the feet and hands that get people food?
- Who are the skin cells that protect from everyday threats, that repair the skin barrier?
- What happens when our bones—our relationships and connections to our ancestors, to each other, and to practices that hold up our communities—are fractured?



# LIMITATIONS

## Missing Demographics

The demographic questionnaire did not ask Participants to identify the following:

- Neighborhood
- Zip Codes
- Education level
- Income level
- Relationship status
- Family size
- Parental status
- Religion
- Employment status
- Disability status
- Experience with incarceration

## Missing Assets

Shareback session Participants also requested more asset mapping to identify what already exists locally. In Appendix D, you can see some of the food system assets identified by Participants and learn about food system maps currently in development.

## Missing Perspectives

Through comments and questions in the Shareback sessions, Imagining Future Food Systems Participants identified groups of people they would have liked to have played a larger role in these visioning sessions:

- Labor from across the food supply chain
  - growers/farmers
  - food processors/food factory workers
  - food transporters
  - food retail workers
  - hot meal preparers
  - gleaners
  - composters and other food waste workers
  - business owners
- Youth
- Milwaukee north side (specifically northwest side) neighbors

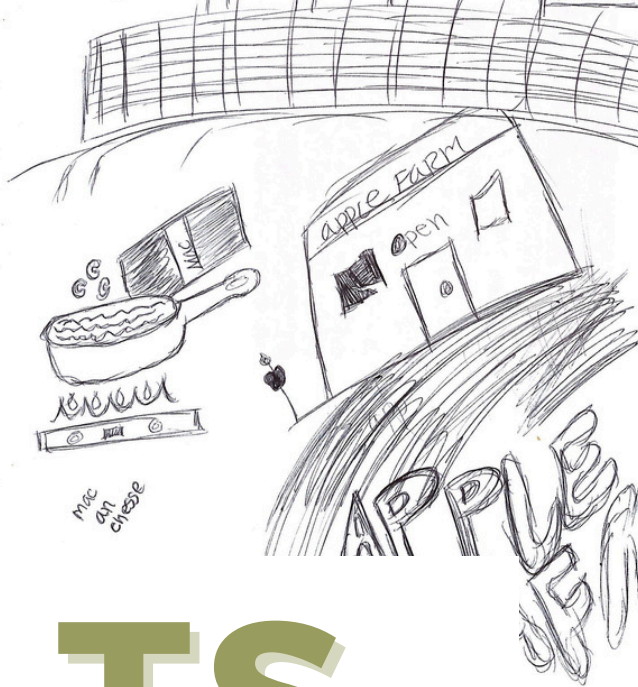
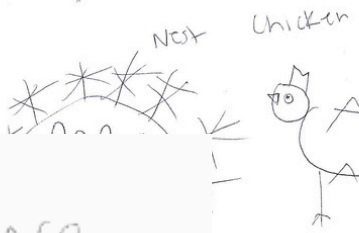
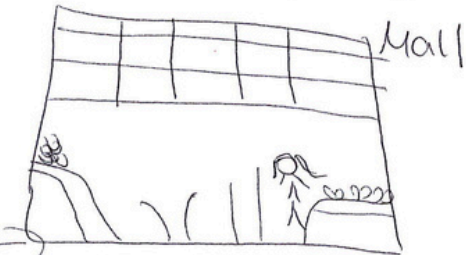
Who has relationships with these groups and can build these connections?

What does a strong local food system look like for each of these groups of people?

una tienda 24 horas



Food Spot

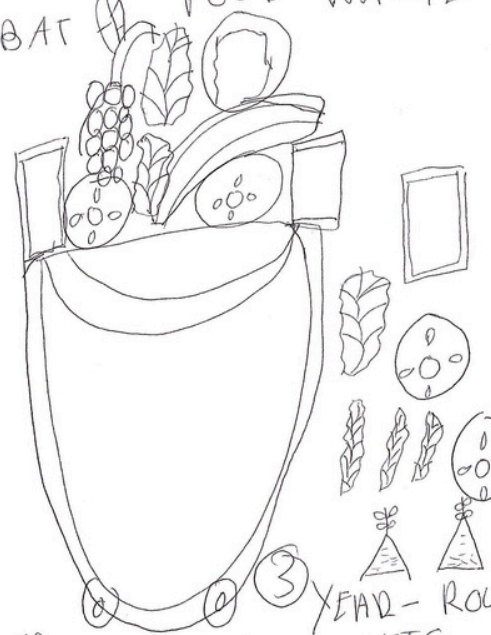


# RESULTS



DEFENSE AGAINST FOOD WASTE - MORE COOLERS AND FRIGES TO COMBAT FOOD WASTE

FRESH COOKED SCHOOL MEALS



3 YEAR-ROUND FARMERS MARKETS AND OTHER COMMUNITY HANDS FOR FOOD RET 15 DURING WINTERS

# MAIN THEMES

Each theme below was associated with at least 100 comments across all Imagining Future Food Systems sessions. People shared their desire for Milwaukee to be a place where food is a priority, and for the local food system to be built by Milwaukeeans.

## 1 Connecting Health, Housing, & Transportation to Food Justice

People told stories of how food has been used to keep people sick, but also how food can heal. Shareback session feedback emphasized the importance of connecting food not only to health, but to housing, labor, employment, and transportation.

## 2 Responding to the Realities of Different Marginalized Communities

People tied in stories of their ancestors and their current lives to illustrate the influence and intentionality of systems that have disrupted access to food.

## 3 A Milwaukee That Prioritizes Food Access

People expressed a desire for a city that campaigns for high-quality and nutritious food as a key to how communities grow vibrantly.

## 4 Reconnecting Relationships

People discussed the loss of key members and events that connected them to food. They dreamed about learning to preserve, re-imagine, and rebuild what was taken away.

## 5 Centering Local Solutions & Global Collective Liberation

People share local solutions and connect their struggles here to global communities through the term, food apartheid. They dream of a future system that is local and not decided by large corporations (standing in solidarity with communities across the globe who are impacted by corporations whose profits take precedence over the well-being of communities and their health).

*For more details about Participants' original comments and how they were coded into these five Main Themes, see Appendix E.*

# OTHER THEMES

Across several sessions, these Other Themes, while not mentioned as frequently as the Main Themes, were brought up on multiple occasions. They were notable for the way they resonated and the conversations they generated when they were brought up.

## ELDERS' RIGHT TO DIGNIFYING FOOD



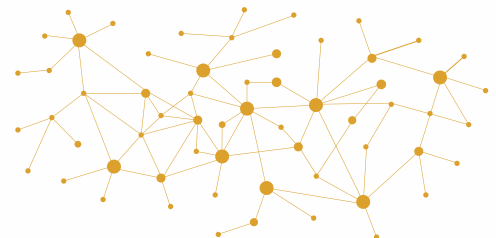
## FARMERS' RIGHTS TO SEEDS, SKILLS, & SUPPORT

## A CITY WHERE WAGES ARE NOT A BARRIER TO CULTURAL AND NUTRITIOUS FOOD



## PROTECTING BLACK & BROWN YOUTH DEVELOPMENT THROUGH ACCESS TO QUALITY FOOD

## EVERYONE UNDERSTANDS & CAN EASILY ENGAGE IN THE LOCAL FOOD SYSTEM HOW THEY WANT TO



*Milwaukeeans imagine a city where relationships to food, to the land, and to each other are rebuilt, and where the local community is centered rather than the interests and benefits of corporations.*



Instead of only a few options across the city, more local growers have opportunity.  
 Goes with \$1 coolers for folks to take produce home, short bus rides to get to one of these markets.

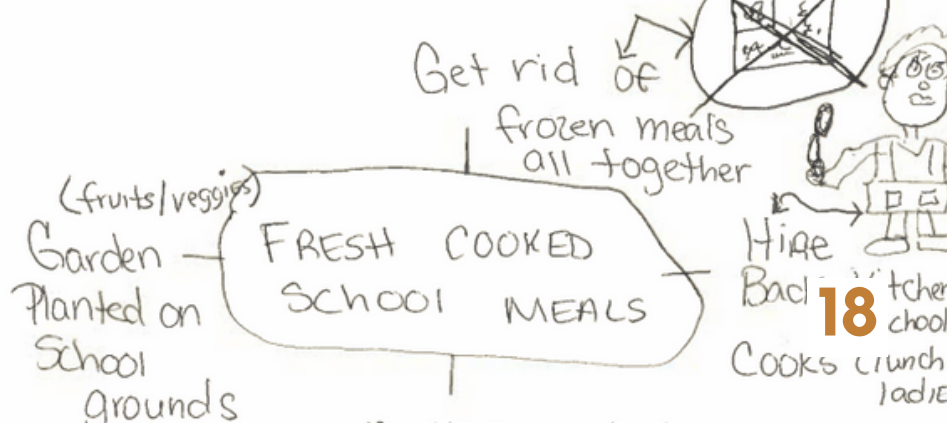
# RECOMMENDATIONS



Community unification, purchase lots as neighbors / Community collectively

Build a team / Council discuss innovative ways to form regulation

community table



## A PATH FORWARD

Through comments, reflections, and feedback, Imagining Future Food Systems Participants generated a range of recommendations for anyone who is looking to improve the local food system. The pages that follow outline Milwaukee neighbors' dreams for the local food system. Some dreams may involve policy changes, some require enhancements of existing resources, and some will require building from the ground up. All are tangible goals for the local community to pursue.

### Principles of Practice

Participants expressed that systemic factors have influenced their experience with the current food system. Indigenous and Tribal Participants shared stories of a food system disrupted by removal, marginalization, and assimilation. Black Participants highlighted the legacy of slavery and systemic policies that have negatively affected access to housing, land, and food. Participants of diverse experiences testified to the consequences of an industrial era that commodified food and minimized consumer control.

As a result, Participants highlighted important principles of practice to follow for anyone looking to advance local food system change:

- Address the realities of local communities in food systems work
- Keep a pulse on historical legacies while attending to the current landscape
- Build on and uplift work that is already happening
- Be mindful of how food systems intersect with other systems
- Build relationships before expecting results
- Compensate community members for their expertise when possible
- Work with those who are in the room, seek out those who are not

RECOMMENDATIONS

# MILWAUKEEANS' DREAMS

The following pages describe the dreams that Imagining Future Food System Participants desire for Milwaukee. These dreams demonstrate the overarching ideas generated in the conversations. How can you help make these dreams a reality?



**Interconnected food networks**



**Large fruit tree system**



**Community-led grocery store regulation group**



**Sustainable & dignifying mutual aid networks**



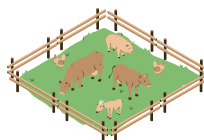
**Coolers, freezers, & fridges to combat food waste**



**A Local Seed System**



**Freshly cooked school meals**



**Increased farm animal access**



**Mobile grocery trucks**



**Corner stores sell more fruit, vegetables, & meat**



**Multi-use buildings include food production throughout all neighborhoods**



**Food boxes with high quality food & more choices for Elders**



**Urban garden & farmland programs**



**Food grown in surplus & empty Green Spaces**

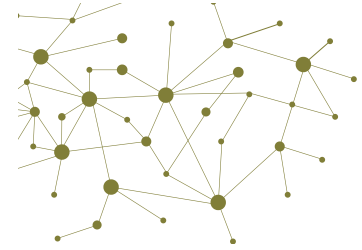


**Investment in & uplifting local farmers**

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Interconnected Food Networks

Residents dream of a world where everyone can access all parts of our food system. They want people to be able to easily become familiar with and navigate the local food system.



### FOOD NEIGHBORHOOD LIAISONS

A participant dreamt of neighborhood liaisons who can share food resources and quick communication about food campaigns. They could become community resource connectors who can quickly mobilize their neighbors around issues of importance.

### LOCAL COMMUNITY FORUM WITH AN ASSET MAPPING PERSPECTIVE

A Shareback session participant talked about wanting more information on assets around Milwaukee. An idea to address this issue is a local forum for shared resources that communities have buy-in and easy access to. People want a way to share resources (such as calling for support for an event or sharing emergency food resources) in real time. Some Shareback session Participants noted that maps and methods for resource sharing exist but are often limited to food system professionals.

### GATHERINGS WHERE PEOPLE SHARE HOT MEALS & BUILD COMMUNITY

Residents shared that they would like more sessions like Imagining Future Food Systems, where they could connect with people in their communities and learn about assets that their neighbors shared. People reflected on how loneliness negatively impacts their physical and psychological health. Many Participants across communities shared a story of losing the connectors in their families—like their mothers, grandmothers, uncles, and aunts—and the increasing financial costs of gathering people. Creating spaces around food for people to gather in their own communities and investing in community cultural events may shape people’s abilities to build deeper connections to their neighbors through food.

### SUPPORT FOR EXPERTS WITH FOOD SKILLS IN COMMUNITIES

While food system professionals are integral to local nutrition education, many community members carry knowledge about growing, preparing, preserving, and reusing food. Elders and other neighbors are eager to share their skills, such as pickling, traditions in gardening, as well as butchering and sharing meat.

RECOMMENDATIONS

## Community-led Grocery Store Regulation Group

This dream arose from the feeling that many grocery stores that Participants frequent demonstrate unacceptable conditions, such as expired foods and infestations of rodents. A local grocery regulation group could build relationships with local grocers, develop criteria for grocery stores to adhere to, and influence what products are offered.



## Coolers, Freezers, & Fridges to Combat Food Waste



Residents dream of a Milwaukee with a network of freezers, fridges, and coolers for public use, as well as community efforts to bring freezers into people’s homes. Participants pointed out that at large employers, including universities and hospitals, there is a lot of food waste. Indigenous communities shared how they use freezers to maintain food access to cultural foods in the winter. Some Participants struggle during winter with access to food, especially with quality produce, due to transportation and other economic barriers, so affordability of other variables like housing and energy must be factored in.

## Freshly Cooked School Meals

Community members shared a desire for freshly prepared, nutritious school meals for youth. Many indigenous families spoke about how their children’s diets changed once they entered school, impacting their children’s mood and health. Community members critiqued the disinvestment in the quality of food for Milwaukee students, especially for Black and Brown children. They connected low-quality school meals and poor nutrition habits to health concerns in the future. Many opened up about their own health conditions, and how their own

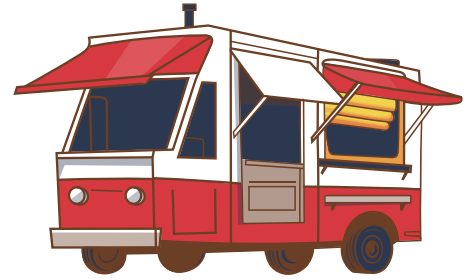


health was impacted by their lack of access to food in their youth, or how corporate-led food advertisements in stores impacted the food habits they developed in their youth. Some elders highlighted the role of the Black Panthers in starting the National School Lunch Program and remembered Milwaukee Public Schools offering freshly prepared school lunches in the past. Participants questioned why school lunches have shifted from fresh to frozen and reheated food.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Mobile Grocery Trucks

Participants highlighted the need for fresh, nutritious food at reduced prices to be available throughout the city. To some extent, this exists in Milwaukee in the form of mobile grocery stores, mobile food pantries, and food pantry-supported food delivery. Participants felt the existing resources could be enhanced with improved access, increased reliability, and more choice (according to dietary needs and cultural preferences, for example). This would be especially beneficial to people who are home-bound or who have limited mobility.



### Multi-use Buildings Include Food Production Throughout All Neighborhoods

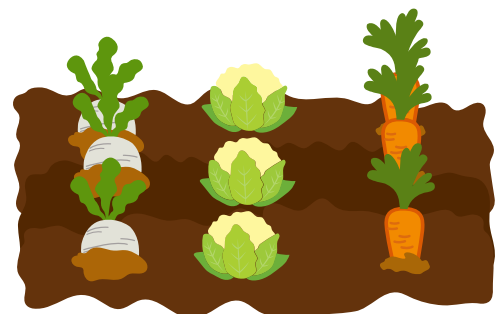


Milwaukee residents dream of vibrant community hubs that mix hydroponics and other local food grower networks with uses like housing, art galleries, libraries, and washer rooms. They dream of utilizing existing vacant buildings for this purpose. These hubs would create ecosystems of jobs that target the local community, who are vulnerable to being displaced by newer corporate job developments and new construction. They would also address the desire for increased opportunities with relationship-building.

### Urban Garden & Farmland Programs

Milwaukee already has a large system of community gardens. However, Participants who have supported these community gardens highlighted the difficulty in maintaining these gardens and having consistent community involvement. Participants made the following suggestions:

- Identify and support growing experts, where communities want gardens, in addition to making growing fun
- Make farming a viable and gainful job option for young Black and Brown youth throughout Milwaukee
- Make empty buildings into hydroponic spaces or greenhouses
- Connect farmers who have meat and other products to community garden networks



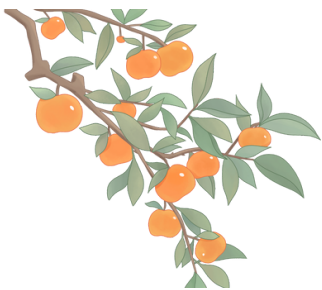
RECOMMENDATIONS

## Investment in & Uplifting Local Farmers

Much of the farming land around Milwaukee grows commodity crops. Residents throughout the sessions want clearer routes from farm to table, as well as investments in Indigenous, Black, and immigrant farmers. Access to land is an issue for farmers and small growers. The children of HMoob growers discussed doubts about wanting to continue the family farm business, highlighting financial concerns—including the need to rent land—and uncertainties about future climate disasters.



## Large Fruit Tree System



Milwaukee currently has some orchards around the city, but a more robust network might prove fruitful. A resident shared that the city cut down his fruit tree, and it devastated him. Another resident shared that she wishes she had learned earlier about an orchard in her neighborhood. People want these orchards all over Milwaukee, within walking distance to where they live, and to have knowledge that they exist for them. Others shared this idea because they wanted to have access to fresh fruits.

## Sustainable & Dignifying Mutual Aid Networks

Pantry volunteers and mutual aid conveners highlighted that support for their efforts is often strong in moments of crisis (COVID-19, government shutdown), but there is a need to build and deepen relationships and the sustainability of this work. Residents in this work consider that our local systems should support people who are already deeply connected.

- Indigenous Participants voiced a desire to rebuild bartering and trading systems
- Participants with disabilities expressed that mobile pantries are a form of dignifying access to food, because they get to choose their own food. This was similarly reflected by people who work with undocumented immigrants



## RECOMMENDATIONS

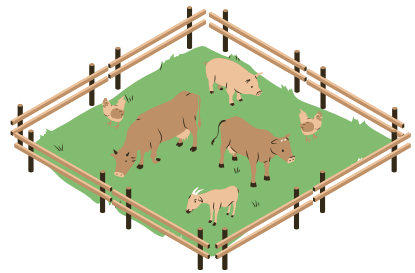
### A Local Seed System



From small-scale gardeners to large farmers, many Participants critiqued the privatization of seeds. While there are some local organizations and public entities that have been working on sharing seeds, people want more knowledge on saving and sharing seeds locally.

### Increased Farm Animal Access

Many people from various immigrant communities discussed the lack of quality meat and access to livestock. They compared their current experiences in Milwaukee to their experiences in their home countries or to previous generations in their family. People attributed their current health ailments to the poor quality of meat. They dream of local access to livestock. Some shared that their families used to butcher animals and share across their families, but that practice and connections to these farms have been lost. Zoning ordinances in Milwaukee allow people to have hens under certain circumstances. Milwaukeeans dream of bringing livestock closer to communities without land or without access to livestock.



### Corner Stores Sell more Fruit, Vegetables, & Meat



Food apartheid has led to food deserts in various parts of the city. By contrast, corner stores exist in abundance. Residents want more fruits, vegetables, and fresh meats in corner stores. One participant in a Shareback session suggested green roofs - food garden plots on the roofs of corner stores. Many Participants liked the idea of more produce and meat in corner stores, and shared feedback on how to make this plan viable and realistic. It will be important to address concerns about the short shelf life of fresh, nutritious food and how to make this dream profitable for store owners.

RECOMMENDATIONS

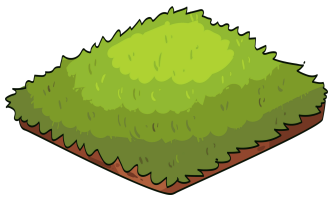
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## Food Boxes with High-Quality Food & More Choices for Elders

Elders need easier access to food. They highlighted the need to expand programs that currently serve seniors. However, they also want choice and higher quality in the products being provided to them. Some highlighted the need to understand how to use the food provided to them; recipes with detailed instructions could be useful in this regard.



## Food Grown in Surplus & Empty Green Spaces



Milwaukee residents recognize that there are many green spaces around Milwaukee, such as vacant lots, roundabouts, and land along highway ramps. They dream of these spaces addressing food access.

# CONCLUSION

Broadly, from this report, the Project Team hopes that this process and the findings:

Contribute to a **vision** for food system change locally.

Contribute to the local shift from *addressing hunger* to *addressing hunger and addressing food injustice*.

Identify **community capacity and assets** to advance food systems change.

Imagining Future Food Systems was designed with the intention for community members to lead efforts to develop a vision for a local food system that works for all. Many individuals, existing groups or organizations, and emerging coalitions are working to increase access to fresh, nutritious food. Advancing this vision for a local food system will build on the work already underway in spaces such as community gardens, local food pantries, grassroots food distribution groups, and food-focused coalitions.

## Lessons

In these sessions, people from all communities expressed feeling encouraged by listening to other neighbors' visions for the future food system. They felt motivated to make connections within their own communities to not only advance food system change but also build new and deepen existing relationships.

At the same time, Imagining Future Food Systems had some shortcomings, some of which are inherent in a visioning process like this. The shortcomings that Participants specifically mentioned include:

- The need for a call-to-action for what Participants can do next.
- The lack of opportunity for food system professionals to share resources with the community.
- The need to more intentionally support and uplift the voices of people who work in the food system, including growers, food processing workers, and food retail workers.
- The desire to have more youth be involved in the process.

Ideally, there would be an opportunity to address these shortcomings in follow-up work related to this visioning process. With the sunseting of the Project Team's work due to the elimination of SNAP-Ed funding, as well as systemic challenges to the current food systems, the future of the work continues to shift.

Even in light of these uncertainties, it is clear that solutions to these challenges will need to be rooted in the visions and relationship-building communities develop for themselves. Some Participants discovered important connections through this process. Others began this type of work long before these visioning sessions and are incorporating new people and lessons into their efforts. The findings reaffirm core principles of this project that those closest to the problem are in the best position to solve it and that communities drive the work of local food system change. Knowledge around food exists inherently within all of our communities.

## **The soil needed for a thriving food system**

Dominant narratives about Milwaukee often focus on needs and deficits. The food system is indeed fragile. Recent events, including the COVID-19 pandemic and FY26 government shutdown, have continued to expose the challenges we collectively face in ensuring that our neighbors are fed in a dignified way. It can be challenging to believe that a different reality is possible.

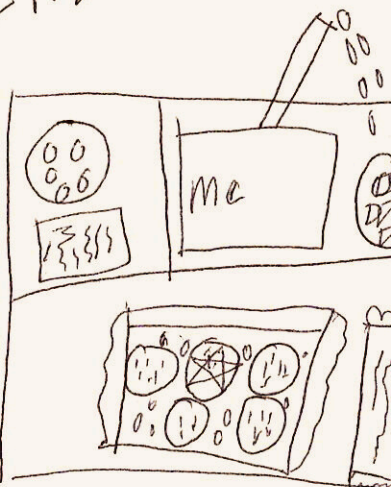
But hope is not lost, and the Imagining Future Food Systems initiative is a testament to this. Neighbors believe in and are calling for healthy, vibrant communities filled with food and nutrition. They spoke clearly of the importance of and a desire for rebuilding relationships as a core tenet of a thriving local food system. The soil needed for a thriving food system is made of the relationships we have with one another and with the food we eat.

**Imagining Future Food Systems challenges a deficit-based narrative by highlighting the resources that already exist and centering potential solutions to food access in Milwaukee within communities' pre-existing, generational knowledge.**

MORE CO  
COMBAT



FRESH  
COOKED  
SCHOOL  
MEALS



# APPENDICES

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When requested, facilitators shared these general definitions:

**FOOD APARTHEID:**

a term coined by Karen Washington that emphasizes the systemic nature of the causes of hunger and food or nutrition insecurity

**NUTRITION SECURITY:**

access or not having a concern about lack of access to food of high nutritional value

**FOOD SECURITY:**

access or not having a concern about lack of access to enough calories

**FOOD DESERT:**

an area without access to a grocery store; “desert” implies this is a natural phenomenon

**HUNGER:**

a feeling produced by not having enough food

**FOOD SWAMP:**

an area with an abundance of fast food restaurants; “swamp” implies this is a natural phenomenon

Below are the original themes derived from the initial Imagining Future Food System sessions. This material was printed out and provided to Shareback session Participants so they could give feedback.

### MAIN THEMES

Each theme was mentioned over 30 times across all Imagining Future Food Systems sessions.

#### **1. A MILWAUKEE WITH A FOOD ACCESS PRIORITY**

People want a city that campaigns for high-quality and nutritious food. This is the key to how communities grow vibrant.

#### **2. RECONNECTING RELATIONSHIPS**

People discuss the loss of key members and events that connected them to food. They dream about learning to preserve, re-imagine, and rebuild what was taken away.

#### **3. CONNECTION TO HEALTH JUSTICE**

People tell stories about how food has been used to keep people sick. People also talk about how food can also heal.

#### **4. THE REALITIES FOR DIFFERENT MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES IN MILWAUKEE**

People tie in stories of their ancestors and their current lives to explain how intentional these systems are.

#### **5. CENTERING LOCAL SOLUTIONS & GLOBAL SOLIDARITY OVER CORPORATIONS**

People share local solutions and connect their struggles here to global communities on food apartheid. They dream of a future system that is local and not decided by large corporations.

### OTHER THEMES

These themes were notable in several sessions.

- DEFENDING BLACK AND BROWN YOUTH DEVELOPMENT THROUGH FOOD
- ELDERS' RIGHT TO DIGNIFYING FOOD
- FARMERS RIGHTS TO SEEDS, SKILLS, AND SUPPORT
- FOOD NETWORKS - EVERYONE EASILY KNOWS AND CAN ENGAGE IN OUR LOCAL FOOD SYSTEM
- A CITY WHERE WAGES ARE NOT A BARRIER TO CULTURAL AND NUTRITIOUS FOOD

# APPENDIX

## SHAREBACK SESSION MATERIALS

The materials below are three of the dreams, derived from the initial Imagining Future Food Systems sessions. These materials were printed out and provided to Shareback session Participants so they could draw, ask questions, and suggest future steps on how to make these dreams possible.

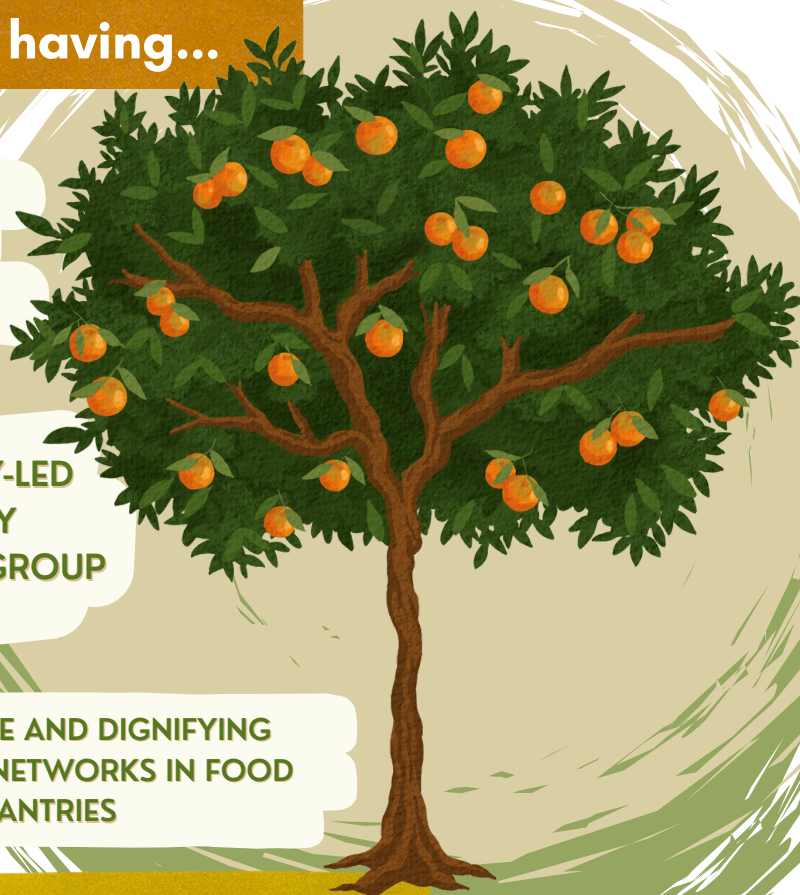
### Milwaukeeans dream of having...

A LARGE  
FRUIT TREE  
SYSTEM

COMMUNITY-LED  
GROCERY  
REGULATION GROUP

SUSTAINABLE AND DIGNIFYING  
MUTUAL AID NETWORKS IN FOOD  
PANTRIES

HOW DO YOU THINK WE CAN MAKE  
THESE DREAMS BECOME REALITY?



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### Points of connections:

As noted in this report, Shareback session feedback has been incorporated into the results. Below are some of the specific reflections offered during Shareback sessions:

- Participants expressed that the dreams Milwaukeeans had for the food system resonated with them, especially fresh school meals and more refrigerators, and freezers
- For many of the dreams, Participants identified next steps, people who are making these dreams possible already, and obstacles that could arise that could prevent achieving the dream
- Participants shared that they felt more connected to other people in their communities, especially Tribal and Indigenous Participants to each other

From the initial IFFS sessions to the Sharebacks, these events served as sites for communities to share resources they were connected to and build relationships with each other. Several Participants across sessions said that ‘food justice’ was something they at first didn’t feel like they knew enough about. After participating, they concluded that they actually had first-hand experiences with food injustice. With these new relationships and time to reflect, neighbors felt a connection to the local food system.

The feedback from these Shareback sessions suggests that any plans on food systems should...

- consider what relationships have been built during this time, and prioritize the maintenance of these relationships.
- value constant reflection and feedback as integral to stronger food systems.

### Main critiques, additions, & alterations:

While there were themes that felt affirming to Milwaukee neighbors at the Shareback sessions, they also shared some challenges and questions on the data and themes:

- The report should...
  - define food injustice, and ground this in historic facts of Milwaukee:
    - Acknowledge SNAP's impact on food pantries and grocery stores
    - Federal funding opportunities
    - Discussion on precolonial food systems
  - Include factors of:
    - transportation
    - nutrition
    - farmers markets
  - Develop Asset mapping - telling a clearer story on what assets already exist and what work is already underway, including successes and challenges.
- The initial report lacked in...
  - a call-to-action for people to feel like their involvement is meaningful.
  - addressing the discrepancies between food professionals knowing food systems, while communities do not know about the resources.
  - Addressing who was and wasn't in the room, in terms of:
    - What neighborhoods Participants came from
    - Including people from all parts of the food system, such as processors, retail and business, and more growers.
    - Northside (northwest) organizations and/or partners



The comments below provide details about how the main themes were coded.

### Main Theme 1: Connecting Health, Housing, and Transportation to Food Justice

260 comments total

49 responses on feelings of frustration with these systems

21 responses on Intentional deprivation

- An abundance of food, while some people don't have nutritious food, especially in the summer
- Abundance of food, stores sending bad stuff into the inner city

22 responses on youth development

- Easy to learn not to like fruit and vegetables from the grocery store setup / believe as an attack by industries on children

9 responses on the nutritional impact on human development

- Processed food
- New generations are developing chronic health conditions, such as Type 2 diabetes
- Meat in America is impacting people's health conditions

38 responses on access to nutritious food

- Affordability, variety, & freshness
- Dietary needs
- Choices between what to feed children and paying other bills

18 responses on types of food lead to health complications

40 responses tied to health justice

- Mental health
- Diabetes and other health complications in family health history
- Working 15 hours a day and developing health issues

21 responses on Intentional deprivation/disenfranchisement

- "If you have food, but people live in food desert, means you don't care."
- Homelessness - "It's expensive to be unhoused."

42 Responses to access to food discrepancies

- Indian reservations, low-income areas, fresh vs not
- "Even Aldi's is expensive now." - prices have moved through the roof
- Location, travel accessibility, and technology
- Low wages vs. food waste at work

The comments below provide details about how the main themes were coded.

## Main Theme 2: Responding to the Realities of Different Marginalized Communities

233 comments total

49 responses on feelings of frustration with these systems

Participants gave accounts on:

- Milwaukee's segregation, redlining, and racism
- Too many requirements from SNAP benefits and health insurance make people choose between working and not working. When working full-time, these things are still expensive and unaffordable
- GMO foods are leading to health complications
- Immigration status, making choices for your family to survive that you wouldn't make if you had enough
- Fast-paced lives force people to eat unhealthily, as the time it takes to make food
- The price of food, time, and knowledge to file for SNAP benefits, and benefit cuts
- Negotiating what to feed children because of food prices
- Gas station as the only food source
- Used to love to eat fruit and veggies and soups, but school changed their appetite
- Job market: working 15 hours a day and developing cholesterol as immigrants
- Sickness makes people more proactive on health, but they feel unjust when it is detrimental to health

9 responses on Black, Indigenous, and HMoob knowledge

- Farming based on ancestors' knowledge
- Fewer heart issues in previous communities

46 responses on the history of enslavement, labor, and land dispossession, food rations

- People not having land to grow, soil conditions, and heinous grocery conditions

35 Response to reality is that food systems are unjust/unfair

- Reality of blaming and pathologizing people living in poverty
- Food as a weapon (on our youth, people globally)
- Hiding food processing details. This is seen as intentional and systemic

49 responses on conditions created by systems of oppression

11 responses on Defending yourself / communities from the attack of corporations

9 responses on connection to land

9 responses on diverse food cultures, diets, and experiences

16 responses on cultural knowledge

The comments below provide details about how the main themes were coded.

### **Main Theme 3: A Milwaukee that Prioritizes Food Access**

186 comments total

**51 responses talk about access to grocery discrepancies.**

Reflecting on the term food apartheid, a Participant reflected that having high-quality and accessible groceries is possible: if clean conditions and fresh groceries exist on the outskirts of Milwaukee with majority white families, access to fresh food within our city “should be easy.” And so, when it isn’t, they state, some intentions suggest that “people just don’t care.” They call on our city to care.

**14 responses comparing/contrasting food quality between neighborhoods**

**6 responses shared about the low quality of food in grocery stores.**

- Undignified conditions, from expired food to rodents in grocery stores, for Black and Brown communities
- The discrepancies in the quality of food are obvious

**38 responses on the dignity to have choices.**

- Have to be selective about what to feed the family because food prices are so high, such as having to stretch \$10 to feed a family

**55 responses about all people deserving the options for healthy, high-quality, and affordable food**

**22 responses on how expensive food prices prevent food access**

- In time and money, food access is a challenge.
- Cheaper food and drinks are processed, and not fresh

The comments below provide details about how the main themes were coded.

### Main Theme 4: Reconnecting Relationships

191 comments total

#### 8 responses on mutual aid

People showed up during COVID, but now have left. Guests and staff feel it. Trauma-informed care that is consistent is needed.

#### 65 responses on how people get their food

- When mothers and grandmothers are gone from the community, loneliness and loss of food access
- Get food from coworkers, staff in schools/colleges, neighbors, store, farmers' market, pantries
- Worried about the relationship with kids, what they learn to like at school

#### 31 responses on past vs present

- Growing up in a culture impacts food today
- Growing food then vs now
- Butchery practices then vs now
- Loss of farm and food education programs
- Ancestors did not have to work but had more time growing their own food, vs. parents/adults are both working
- Health because of current vs past food
- Grappling with what it means when Black ancestors were enslaved, forced to work on land, and now the disconnection to the land
- From growing organic to processed food as refugees/immigrants/previous farmers in family history

#### 55 responses on self-exploration

- Many are on a journey with their relationship with food, experimenting
- Desire to learn and an active journey to know more
- Learning what to feed children
- Learning the homestead process like butter, sharing, and gaining skills
- We are already deeply connected to resources and the sharing of resources

#### 32 responses on own relationship with food

“We were talking about the relationship to food, and we didn’t think we had one, but as we talked more, we realized we do have a relationship with food.”

The comments below provide details about how the main themes were coded.

### **Main Theme 5: Centering Local Solutions & Global Collective Liberation**

107 comments total

18 responses with local vs industrial

13 responses on responsibility for food regulation

14 responses on capitalism

- Loss of supermarkets and smaller stores
- Growing and green space locally vs Industries with concentrated control
- The population is growing, so there is a need to keep up – GMOs, chemicals in growing, etc.
- Prioritizing the interests of companies, not customers, means the quality of food decreases
- Seeds are controlled and manipulated
- Convenience/commercialism over learning canned food knowledge
- Colonialism impacts Indigenous bodies, impacting their health

13 responses for the future system are local

- Access to land
- Relationships and shared systems
- People change their eating habits at the places they shop
- Do not get overwhelmed by larger systems, but prioritize local systems


20 responses on the future of food justice

- How we train in food work needs to be dignifying
- Judges/justice system should protect food
- Food as medicine
- Justice is no restrictions or judgment
- Food Justice is not a destination. Must have someone making sure it continues
- The future of food justice is standing, unwavering. Doesn't go by the rule book that has barriers
- Farming – people learning how to tend land, joy in the produce they grow
- Showing up for kids rallying for school lunches

15 responses on food sovereignty

14 responses on current areas of connection and resources people have to food





*SNAP-Ed funding was the primary financial support for Imagining Future Food Systems. With the passage of the congressional spending bill on July 4, 2025, SNAP-Ed funding was eliminated beginning with the 2026 federal fiscal year on October 1, 2025. If you are interested in connecting with the Project Team to learn more about this work, please reach out to Lee Valentyn at [leevalentynsnaped@gmail.com](mailto:leevalentynsnaped@gmail.com) and Hannah Trasser at [htrasser@milwaukee.gov](mailto:htrasser@milwaukee.gov).*