In 2007, the Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future (CLF) and Operation ReachOut Southwest (OROSW), a coalition of 13 neighborhoods, joined together to conduct a Community Food Assessment (CFA) of southwest Baltimore.

The goal was to find out what food stores offered, where residents’ were getting food and what foods residents’ wanted. These results can be used to develop strategies to improve food availability for southwest Baltimore residents.

The assessment consisted of a food store survey measuring the cost and availability of food, and a residents’ survey to determine important food and nutrition issues facing the community. The assessment also included many informal conversations among local residents, from which many of the community’s strengths were revealed. The United Parcel Services foundation funded the assessment through the Community Food Security Coalition.

OROSW’s interest in taking part in the assessment stemmed from participation in a 2003 health disparities study conducted by the Morgan-Hopkins Center for Health Disparities Solutions that revealed OROSW community’s rate of diet-related diseases was higher than many other communities in Baltimore.

As a result of the health disparities study, OROSW began undertaking activities such as starting an organic garden and participating in harvesting events to improve the food available to community members. This CFA expands understanding of the situation by looking at what food stores supply and understanding what residents’ need and want.

**Assessment Objectives**

1. Identify individual barriers to consuming a healthy diet for those living in the OROSW area.
2. Identify institutional barriers to accessing healthy foods in targeted communities.
3. Identify educational and communication opportunities to increase awareness of the importance of healthy diets and food access issues among all stakeholders.
4. Gauge the community’s awareness of the relationship between diet and disease and interest in community food activities.

**What is a community food assessment?**

“Community Food Assessment (CFA) is a collaborative and participatory process systematically examining a broad range of community food issues and assets, to take action to make the community more food secure.”1 CFAs discover weaknesses in the local food system and food environment and also identify community assets to improve the weaknesses.

1 Community Food Security Coalition, What’s cooking in your food system? 2002.

**Results from Community Food Assessment in Southwest Baltimore**

**Food Security**

“Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food to meet their dietary need and food preferences for an active and healthy life.”

-UN Food and Agricultural Organization, 1996

**The surveys**

CLF assessed 41 food stores using a modified version of the Nutritional Environment Measurement Survey (NEMS) which records the availability, selection, quality and price of food items.

The residents’ survey, developed with technical assistance from the Food Trust, inquires about food access, availability, selection, quality and shopping and eating patterns. Ninety-six respondents were included in the analysis.
FINDINGS

**Availability of Milk**

- Whole or 2% Only: 47%
- Both Regular and Skim: 29%
- Skim Milk Only: 12%
- No Milk Available: 12%

**Dairy**
One-third of the stores surveyed did not sell milk; while one-half sold only whole or 2% milk. Of the combined freezer units in stores, nearly one-half of the space was devoted to ice cream and ice cream products.

**Shopping Habits**
Nearly 50 percent spend time acquiring food in corner stores, 17 percent at carry outs, and 12 percent in supermarkets. 49 percent of food money is spent at supermarkets ($280 monthly average); 20 percent at corner stores ($114 monthly average).

**Fresh Produce and Meat**
Three-quarters of the stores sold no fruit, while two-thirds sold no vegetables. Only 19 percent of the stores sold “lean beef,” while two-thirds sold hot dogs.

**Ready for Change**
Over three-quarters (82 percent) said they would buy food that was grown in the OROSW area at a farmers’ market in their neighborhood.

**Voucher Acceptance**
37 percent of the stores accept Women, Infant, & Children vouchers (WIC), and almost one-half of these (47 percent) do not sell skim milk. In addition, nearly 40 percent do not sell carrots. Both are mandatory WIC items.

**Bread**
20 percent of the stores said they sold no bread, while 56 percent said they sold only white bread.

**Food**
Percentage of residents who were “very” or “somewhat” dissatisfied with food sold in their area: Quality: 20 percent; Selection: 30 percent; Availability of Healthy Food: 40 percent; Price: 30 percent. Half of those surveyed said they were sometimes or often unable to buy healthy foods due to cost.

**Eating Habits**
Almost 95 percent said do not eat recommended five fruits and vegetables a day, but 50 percent were very interested in learning more about healthy food preparation. Sixty percent strongly agree that good health is related to eating. Half of those surveyed said they prepare meals from scratch daily or several times a week, and two-thirds are interested in changing current eating patterns.