

Charlottesville Food Justice Network

White Paper on Building a Healthy and Just Local Food System

*Identifying and understanding disparities in food access, defining food justice,
and a call to action to craft equitable practices and policies that uphold food as a
basic human right*

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This white paper is the curated research of Shantell Bingham, M.P.H., City Schoolyard Garden Liaison to Charlottesville Food Justice Network & CFJN Facilitator.

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Introduction

In 2015, 42 million people struggled with hunger in the United States, including 13 million children and 5.4 million seniors¹. Almost 50% of these citizens live in food deserts, environments characterized by limited access to nutritious foods, while the total food insecure population lives in poverty². Hunger has its side effects. Low-income residents in rural and urban neighborhoods experience higher rates of obesity and diet related diseases. As a result, they are negatively impacted by a lack of access to affordable and nutritious foods.

Despite efforts by hundreds of organizations and agencies working to find a solution to the epidemic of diet-related diseases, the growing problem of food security exist. For Charlottesville 17.5% or 1 in 6 residents face food insecurity, a trend that outpaces Virginia's average of 11.9%³. In addition, when we take a closer look at the breakdown of diet related diseases and food access across Charlottesville demographics, we see the most disparaging divide is black and white.

Indeed, local disparities in health and food access have been marked by race and class for decades. However, these trends are not inevitable and crafting sustainable local

interventions for systemic change is not impossible. This is the understanding and core principal of the Charlottesville Food Justice Network, an emerging collaborative of community based organizations working in unique and complementary ways to build a healthy and just food system. In the following white paper, we present our call to action for change in approaching local food insecurity work, our understanding of food justice, and historical research underpinning the need for racial equity and whole system networking in local food system reform.

Facing the Facts: Local Health Disparities and Stagnant Trends

Despite billions in funding support from government organizations and charities dedicated to hunger alleviation programming, food insecurity rates have not declined in two decades⁴. This national tale breaks through to Charlottesville's local level. Today, when we look at statistics we see that between 2001 and 2011, the number of households receiving SNAP benefits in Charlottesville increased by 120%⁵. In addition, people with low economic resources and people of color suffer disproportionately higher rates of diet-related diseases and subsequent mortality. For example, obesity prevalence among Black Virginians (39.2%) is almost

¹ Feeding America, "Hunger and Poverty Facts."

² Nisbet, "Urban Food Deserts and Washington, D.C."; USDA, "USDA Defines Food Deserts | American Nutrition Association."

³ Charlottesville Loaves and Fishes Food Pantry, "Charlottesville Loaves and Fishes Food Pantry - About Hunger."

⁴ USDA Economic Research Service shows that food insecurity rates in 1995 at 12% and rates in 2015 at 12.7%, "Food Security in the U.S."

⁵ Virginia Department of Health. (2012) *Community Health Assessment Presentations: Charlottesville/Albemarle CHA Data*. ONLINE POWERPOINT PRESENTATION. Retrieved from <http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/LHD/ThomasJefferson/Data.htm>.

1.5 times greater than White Virginians (25.7%)⁶. When it comes to diet related mortality rates, black Charlottesville citizens are 4 times more likely to die of diabetes than their white neighbors⁷.

For youth, we see similar trends in food insecurity when we look at school lunch programming. In our schools, over 57% of the student population are eligible to receive free- and reduced-price meals; and in some neighborhoods, that number runs as high as 82%⁸. At the same time, nearly 37% of Charlottesville third- and fifth-graders are classified as overweight or obese this number is 49% for African American youth⁹. Many of these youth live in neighborhoods with limited access to fresh fruits and vegetables—a direct legacy of redevelopment policies, a topic we will discuss further.

Current perspectives on Food Justice and Cause for Concern

While the evidence supporting the need to strategically focus on race and class in food insecurity and hunger work is abundant, local movement towards adopting a racial equity approach has been slow. Instead, the Charlottesville local food movement has gained substantial ground in changing the way our local food is produced, processed, and sold based on sustainability concerns. Thus, our city is ripe with food advocates advancing the message and practice of

sustainable agriculture and organic farming for higher quality locally produced foods. These local principals have garnered Charlottesville the status of a “Foodie City”.

Indeed, Charlottesville has an abundance of locally sourced, healthy, nutritious foods. However, this food is not accessible for all. Nevertheless, current perspectives around food justice in Charlottesville oftentimes focuses on sustainable farming issues, while ignoring the most marginalized populations facing food insecurity and raising concern for sustainable change. Due to this precedent understanding of food justice, the first undertaking of the Charlottesville Food Justice Network has been to heighten the discussion on food justice with an emphasis on our city’s most marginalized citizens whom our organizations serve and partner with.

Defining Food Justice

Food justice is the practice and process of considering food as a basic human right. From the human rights perspective, the field of food justice challenges us to approach food insecurity through the lens of social justice in order to advance true sustainable change. Taking a food justice approach to food insecurity, therefore means considering food related health disparities across race and class as nonrandom outcomes of discriminatory policies. In this way, food justice innately

⁶ Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, “Virginia State Obesity Data, Rates and Trends: The State of Obesity.”

⁷ Center for Disease Control, “Community Health Status Indicator Profile Charlottesville.”

⁸ Virginia Department of Education: Office of School Nutrition Programs, “School Year 2012-2013

National School Lunch Program (NSLP) Free and Reduced Lunch Price Eligibility Report, School Level.”

⁹ Community Action on Obesity TEST, “Obesity and Overweight in Charlottesville & Albemarle.”

exists at the intersection of multiple systems. When food justice is established we are assured that the safe and fair production, the equitable and responsible distribution, and the independent and informed preparation of fresh, nutritious, culturally appropriate food exists for all our citizens no matter race/ethnicity, class, age, nationality, gender, or zip code.

Understanding the Root Causes of Local Food Insecurity

Traditional root cause analysis of food insecurity focused on the individual; therefore, government support in hunger alleviation programming in the form of the Farm Bill, largely focused on SNAP and TANF¹⁰. These practices continue today, although the link between food insecurity and poverty have been well documented¹¹. Indeed, hunger is a symptom of poverty, and poverty is a multifaceted issue affecting more than 1 in 4 Charlottesville residents. In 2014, 25.9% of Charlottesville residents lived below the FPL, which is the highest rate in TJHD, and also higher than the state and United States average¹². As previously highlighted, many of these residents living in poverty are disproportionately people of color, comprised of the immigrant and refugee community as well as the Black American community.

If we consider health disparities and unequal access to nutritious foods across race/ethnicity, gender, class, and religion as

a nonrandom phenomenon, then we are forced to confront and understand the realities of a system working to create such inequalities. Thus, the root cause analysis undertaken by the Charlottesville Food Justice Network takes a closer look at the historical social and political fabric which has dictated access to quality food by restructuring our urban landscape and economic class.

In the following discussion, we explore the historical backdrop of redevelopment and school integration which has shaped unequal access to healthy nutritious foods across race and class. These two historical events are presented as root causes of creating inner city food insecurity through the creation of generational poverty, and prevalence of academic achievement gaps—a direct factor in determining job opportunities and future earning potential.

Redevelopment of Vinegar Hill and The Creation of Generational Poverty

From the 1920s to early 1960s the neighborhood Vinegar Hill, located behind the downtown mall of Charlottesville, functioned as a hub for African American businesses and a stronghold of local homeownership. The site hosted over 600 residents and 29 business—including four grocery stores, a school, and multiple churches¹³. In a 1960 survey of the 29 businesses, the city of Charlottesville reported that the Vinegar Hill businesses had a combined gross income of \$1.6

¹⁰ Fisher, *Big Hunger*.

¹¹ The Hunger Project, “Poverty”; Bread for the World, “What Causes Hunger.”

¹² Virginia Planning District 10, “MAPP 2 Health Thomas Jefferson Health District.”

¹³ Saunders and Shackelford, *Urban Renewal and the End of Black Culture in Charlottesville, Virginia*.

million for the previous year¹⁴. Despite the economic vitality of the community, Vinegar Hill was still regarded as a “country-style slum”. Many of the residents raised farm animals on their property, as well as maintained vegetable and fruit gardens. The presence of rural elements intertwined

with degrading housing, was regarded as a “blight” on the Charlottesville downtown and thus in 1954 during the height of the Brown v. Board of Education decision to integrate schools, City Council approved the creation of a Housing Authority.¹⁵



Figure Vinegar Hill c.1960 from Vinegar Hill Project



East view of Vinegar Hill before Demolition

In 1960, Charlottesville voters approved a referendum authorizing the Housing Authority's plan for the redevelopment of Vinegar Hill. Despite the fact that the outcome of this vote could decimate the landscape of the Charlottesville Black American community, the redevelopment poll tax excluded most Black Americans from this vote, including many residents of the Vinegar Hill community.¹⁶ This decision would go on to drastically shift the landscape of the Charlottesville Black American community.

In 1964, a time marked by high racial tensions and social instability, Vinegar Hill was leveled and many of the approximately

500 residents were relocated into Charlottesville's first public housing project called Westhaven. While Urban Renewal and the redevelopment of Vinegar Hill was designed as an intervention to allegedly improve the quality of life for many black Charlottesville residents, today we witness a legacy that has done quite the opposite. The concept model of resource redistribution depicted in figure one, illustrates how the redevelopment of Vinegar Hill created opportunities for economic gains for some, predominantly white citizens, while taking away economic opportunities for others, predominately black citizens.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ “Vinegar Hill | City of Charlottesville.”

Major Outcomes of Resource Redistribution as a Result of Redevelopment

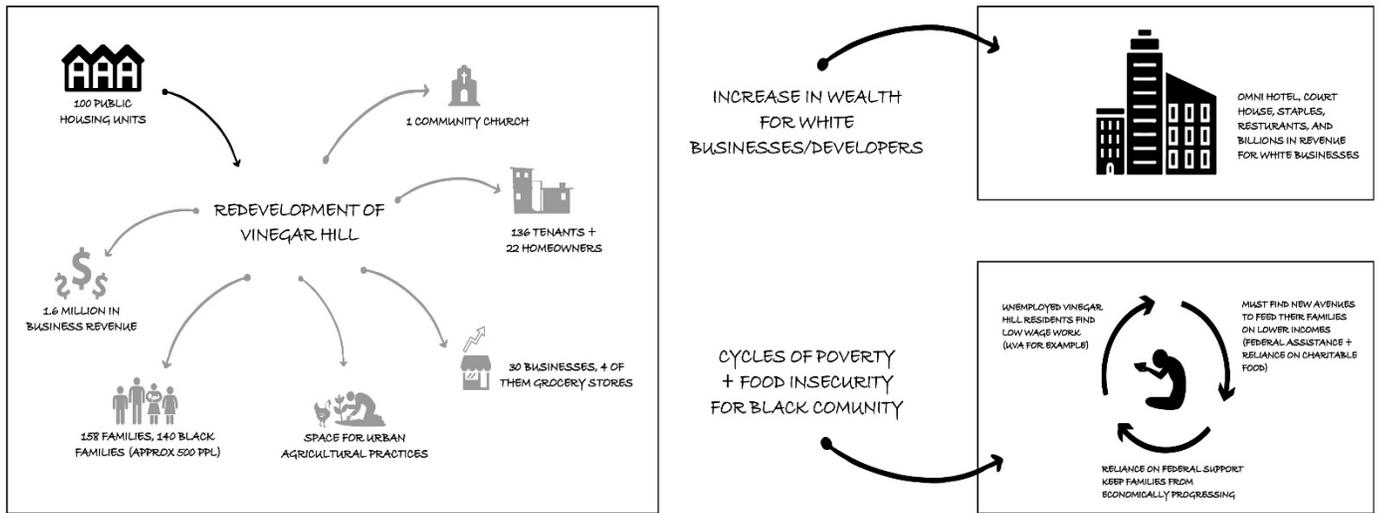


Figure 1 Concept model depicting major outcomes of redevelopment (Urban Renewal) as a tool to redistribute resources in Charlottesville, VA.



West View of Vinegar Hill After Demolition



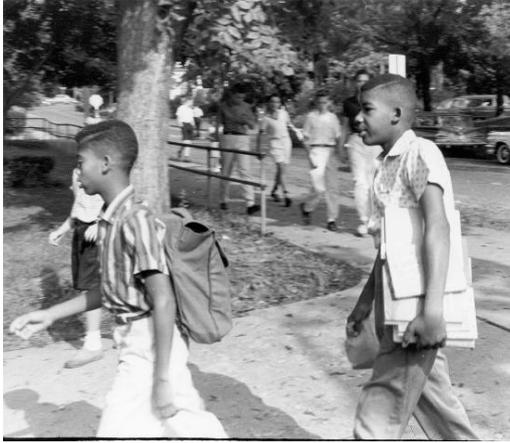
Westhaven construction c.1964 from Payne Collection

School Integration: From Unequal Education to Unequal Health Outcomes

Following the 1954 Supreme Court *Brown v. Board of Education* case ruling to end public school segregation, Charlottesville began efforts for integration though at a slower pace than the rest of the nation. For starters, the national ruling was met with

massive local resistance by parents and the school board. The NAACP and the students' parents sued the Charlottesville City School Board for access in 1955, but the school board didn't budge on integration. Thus, U.S. District Judge John Paul ruled in 1956 that the city must integrate Lane High School and Venable Elementary; this decision was also heavily appealed by the school board¹⁷.

¹⁷ Provence, "On Brown's 50th."



Students Integrating Venable Elementary, 1959

The push back against integration continued with Governor James Lindsey Almond, Jr. who upheld an order for the shutdown of schools in September 1958. City schools remained closed in Charlottesville until the fall of 1959 when Judge Paul ordered that the twelve students who would become known as "The Charlottesville Twelve" be transferred immediately from their previous schools, all-black Jefferson Elementary School and Jackson P. Burley High School, to Venable Elementary and Lane High School¹⁸.

Charlottesville's distinct history of massive resistance to mandated school integration resulted in the emergence of a prolific private school system, and overall efforts of educational segregation that still impact learners today.¹⁹ In fact, out of the Thomas Jefferson Health District, Charlottesville has the lowest on-time graduation rate for economically disadvantaged students with

¹⁸ Virginia Foundation for Humanities, "Fifty Years Ago Today, a Massive Resistance."

¹⁹ Private School Review shows there are 22 private and 24 public schools in Albemarle County. "Albemarle County, VA Private Schools."



Students Integrating Lane High School, 1959

75.3%²⁰. Unequal education provides specific academic gains for some, particularly white students while taking away academic gains for others, particularly black students. City of Promise, one of the Charlottesville Food Justice Network organizations, has documented how educational gains, or lack thereof, are shown to have lifelong impacts on health and long-term food security by determining an individual's job opportunities and future earning potential²¹.

Building a Framework to Address Change

Many of the Food Justice Network nonprofits operating today, were created as a response to the broken systems and structural inequities described above. Our current work, has not only been to combine and amplify efforts of building a healthy and just food system as envisioned by the seven

<https://www.privateschoolreview.com/virginia/albemarle-county>

²⁰ Virginia Planning District 10, "MAPP 2 Health Thomas Jefferson Health District."

²¹ City of Promise, "City of Promise Annual Assessment Results and Segmentation Analysis."

fields of whole measures, but also to understand the historical context which has dictated present day inequalities. The CFJN recognizes the need to collaborate and confront the intersection of multiple factors that contribute to unequal food access, poverty, and health outcomes. Our overall goal is to see thriving and healthy people in our community across racial, economic, ethnic, religious and generational lines.

We believe in a holistic approach to food justice which values sustainable agriculture while uplifting every member of the community. In Figure two, we present our equity framework for addressing change.

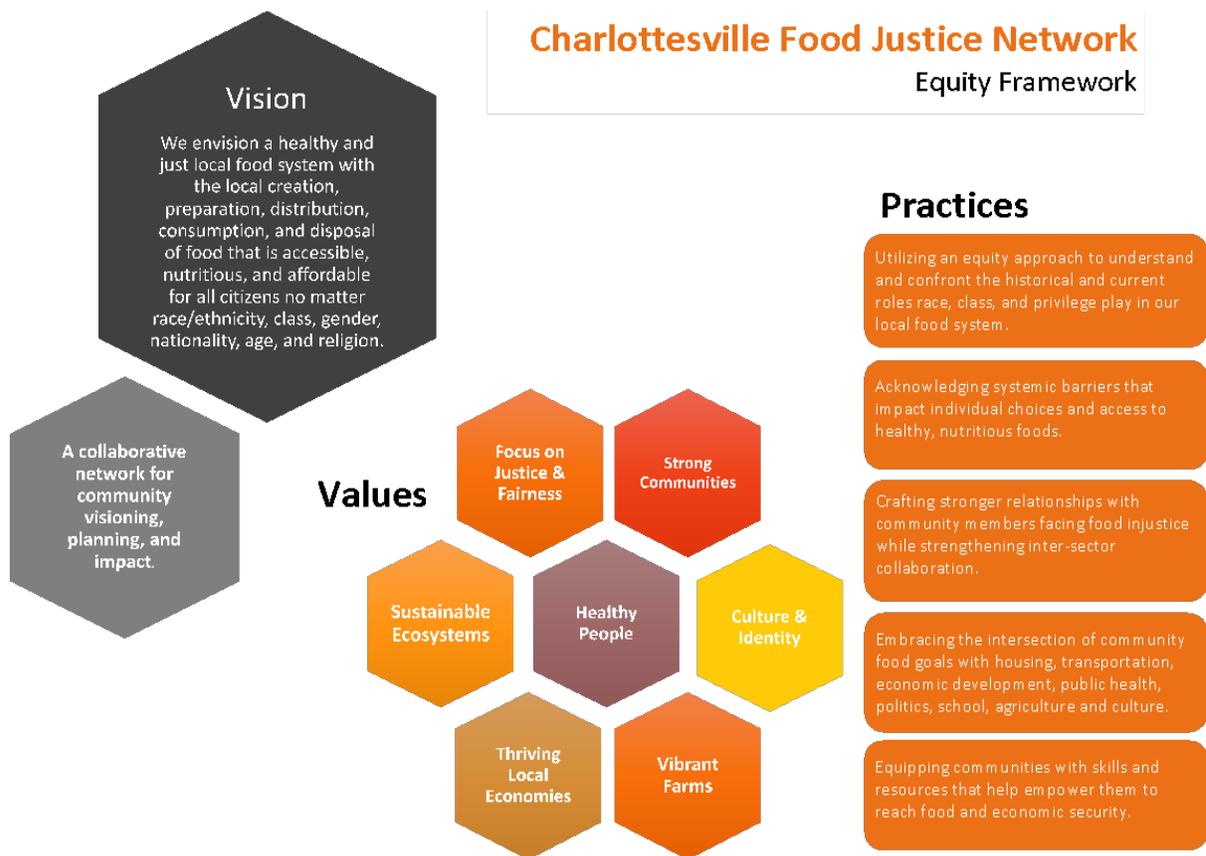


Figure 2 Equity Framework Charlottesville Food Justice Network

Moving towards change

Building an ethical food system means understanding the intersections of multiple factors such as social hierarchy, housing, economic development, politics, transportation, and much more in order to

take an effective systems approach. While hunger, food insecurity, and poverty are entrenched problems, Charlottesville also possesses a wealth of assets and capabilities that provide unique opportunities to address these local inequities and improve food security. The

Charlottesville Food Justice Network, represents an example of a developing organization with the assets and capabilities to do so. Based in part on a Food Policy Audit conducted by the UVA Food Collaborative, and subsequent recommendations, the CFJN presents recommendations to align City resources to achieve food justice for all. The following are separated into Practice recommendations, and Policy recommendations, and are based in CFJN's work in root cause analysis, racial equity, and social justice.

Recommendations for Practice

1. Consider local history and its impact on current inequity in food access, specifically racial inequity, in all planning and redevelopment discussions.
2. Adopt Food Access and Food Justice as key elements in Charlottesville's planning, zoning, and investment discussions.
3. Set Living Wage guidelines for the City of Charlottesville, and make a commitment to adopting these guidelines for City employees, in order to help close the poverty gap.
4. Together with Charlottesville Food Justice Network and its partner members, including Charlottesville City Schools, food and garden literacy can be amplified in public education.

²² Boswell, Fraiche, and Williams, "Charlottesville Community Food System- PLAC 5850 Community Food System Policies."

1. Establish clear lines of communication and record keeping so that everyone involved in the local food system, from suppliers to consumers, are recognized, heard, and aware of each other's work.²²
5. Craft a charter or pledge collaboratively with a diverse set of citizens that focuses on dismantling racism in the local food system, expanding food access to all citizens through sustainable and affordable avenues, and promoting a healthy environment in all our neighborhood, workplaces, and schools.

Recommendations for Policy

1. Develop food-specific language and a food section in the City's Comprehensive Plan in order to influence City policies and cultivate institutional and private sector support for food and wellness programs.²³
2. Support transportation that is food-destination based so that the City can assess transportation to markets, grocery stores, community gardens, and emergency food services.²⁴
3. Investigate land use, zoning, and ordinance policies that might inhibit grocery stores, markets, gardens, or edible landscapes and adjust to

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

incentivize investment across all neighborhoods.²⁵

Locate grocery stores, or sources of fresh, healthful food within walking distance of the neighborhood.²⁶

4. Optimize public transportation to make trips to the grocery store efficient.

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