



Hmong Gardening Focus Group

As part of our work with Gardening Matters' Local Food Hubs, CAPI is acting as a cultural liaison to help the Hubs program better serve immigrant and refugee communities. This focus group, conducted on June 19th 2012, aimed to identify the needs of the Hmong community in regards to healthy food and gardening. Due to linguistic and cultural barriers, CAPI's clients, who are primarily low-income immigrants and refugees, likely have a low rate of response to traditionally conducted surveys; as shown below, the Northside Healthy Eating Assessment received far fewer responses from individuals identifying as Asian than is representative of North Minneapolis demographics. Given Hmong individuals' underrepresentation in institutionally-conducted surveys and polls, responsiveness to the needs of the immigrant and refugee community is likely lacking, as the difficulties facing Hmong families in accessing healthy and fresh food have not yet been adequately described. This focus group therefore represents an effort to increase information about the Hmong community's needs and goals in regards to healthy food and gardening. The results of this focus group will inform CAPI's outreach and education efforts to the Hmong community, and will be incorporated into recommendations CAPI provides to the Local Food Hubs program.

Background

The participants for this focus group were all of Hmong descent, and were recruited through CAPI's Asian Food Shelf and through the Eldercare Program; fifteen clients attended, out of which thirteen were female and two were male. Nine of the clients reside in the Near North neighborhood, two live in Camden, and one each live in Lynnhurst, Powderhorn, and Otsego, MN. Twelve of the clients participate in CAPI's gardening program, and four of the clients use CAPI's Asian-specific food shelf. One client's residency and participation in CAPI programs could not be ascertained.

CAPI's Asian Food Shelf, Eldercare, and Community Gardens Programs mostly, but not exclusively, serve the Hmong community. The Food Shelf has been in operation since 1982, and is Minnesota's only Asian-specific food

shelf. So far in 2012, the food shelf has served over 1,667 individuals ¹.

By responding to our clients' need for linguistic accessibility (the Food Shelf is managed by Hmong-speaking staff), CAPI's Asian Food Shelf both provides culturally appropriate food, and acts as a gateway through which clients gain access to other social services, such as housing assistance, ELL classes, and food stamp assistance. CAPI's Eldercare program works with individuals who provide care for their elderly relatives, by providing resources to assist with the medical, social, and economic difficulties that caregivers face. This year, the Eldercare program has already served over 84 individuals ².

In addition to these programs, many of the focus group participants are actively working with CAPI's food justice programs, including

¹CAPI, *2012 1st Quarter Report*.

http://www.capiusa.org/resources/Reports/CAPI_1st_Quarter_Report_2012.pdf.

²Ibid., 1



the community gardens and corner store programs. Since 2010, CAPI has helped to bring about four community gardens, including one in Brooklyn Center, two in North Minneapolis, and one at Glendale Townhomes in Prospect Park. The community gardens project was created to empower refugees and immigrants as community leaders, while also providing access to affordable, fresh, and culturally suitable food, as most clients choose to grow vegetables in their garden plots. The corner stores project is a new collaboration between CAPI and the City of Minneapolis, and is a program which seeks to increase the availability and attractiveness of produce at small neighborhood stores. CAPI's Food Shelf, Eldercare, and food justice projects all work to provide health and equity resources to clients.

Methods

CAPI recruited clients for the focus group from the Asian Food Shelf and from the Eldercare Program. However, only one (out of fifteen) of the participants was referred from the Food Shelf, while the rest were Eldercare program clients. Since the focus group was scheduled immediately after a monthly Eldercare group held at NorthPoint Health and Wellness Center, it is unsurprising that most of the focus group participants were Eldercare clients who chose to stay after the Eldercare group.

The questions posed to the focus group were created by CAPI's Health and Food Projects team, with considerable input from Gardening Matters. Additionally, two questions addressed the effects of healthy food and gardening on the participants families, and these questions were created by CAPI's Refugee and Immigrant Women for Change (RIWC) Coalition Coordinator. While the questions were initially drafted in English, the focus group was conducted in Hmong; video and written notes of the participants' answers were taken.

Findings

The participants indicated that the fresh vegetables and fruits that they consumed most often included leafy greens, corn, peppers, cucumbers, eggplant, bitter greens, and a variety of fruit. Meat appeared less often in their diets; poultry, beef, shrimp, and pork were the types of meat most often consumed. The stated primary barriers to accessing fresh produce were lack of financial resources (with some participants saying that they could only afford to eat fresh produce monthly) and lack of transportation. The lack of transportation meant that some participants only went to the store monthly, and bought a variety of produce when they shopped, in order to always have access to vegetables even when they couldn't go to the store. This suggests that our clients may be more interested in produce that keeps well. The stores they went to most often were Hmong corner stores, due to the familiarity of the produce stocked there, and Cub Foods, which carries non-traditional varieties of produce. However, most participants appeared dissatisfied with the quality of produce they were able to get, mentioning that financial reasons often prevented them from buying high-quality produce. Most participants said that flea markets, farmers' markets, and Asian grocery stores had lower prices than did American chain stores, and that the higher prices at the American stores prevented them from buying produce there.

When asked about gardening, most participants indicated that they grew produce, including corn, peppers, cucumbers, leafy greens, green onions, cilantro, long beans, sweet peas, and squash. The produce that was not consumed immediately was frozen to eat over the winter to save on food costs; this suggests that programming on food preservation may be of particular interest to our clients. Most of the participants already gardened, and did so in CAPI's garden sites as well as their own backyards. While they ate most of the food they grew, some of it was also given away to neighbors, friends, and relatives. Participants

saw numerous benefits to gardening, including exercise, learning from others, community involvement, relaxation, gaining a source of food, and the ability to share their produce with neighbors and friends. They also saw gardening as a focus for their thoughts, as it kept them thinking about what they should grow, how to maintain their gardens, when to harvest, and how to prepare for winter. Gardening for our clients is therefore not merely a utilitarian activity, but one that allows them to engage socially and mentally with their environments and communities. However, many participants wanted more land close by to garden in, and didn't want to travel far to garden and grow produce. When asked about learning and teaching gardening topics, participants said that they wanted to learn more about safe fertilizers and other means of creating quality soil, and how to grow apples and other fruit. Participants were confident in their ability to teach general gardening skills, such as how to plant and maintain produce. However, they questioned their ability to teach others due to language barriers, and they also questioned whether people would want to learn from Hmong gardeners.

We also asked two questions on gender equity and gender roles in regards to gardening and household nutrition. Participants who had a partner in the household (most of which were male as our group had 13 women and two men participating) said that in general, their spouse guarded the garden site, and did heavier activities such as fencing, carrying water, weeding, and transporting produce. Those who did not have a spouse or partner in the household said that their children helped with the garden, and that when their children were not there they gardened with others in order to have help available if they needed it. Participants stated that gardening had numerous benefits to their households, including increased availability of

fresh produce, saving money for other needs, the ability to share produce, pride and happiness in being able to provide food for their families, increased engagement in the community, and having an activity to be involved in. Participants also had ideas for the future; they wanted to generate ideas for how to improve gardening skills among Hmong gardeners, they were interested in forming a group to represent community gardeners and gain access to gardening resources, and they wanted to work with the city to find more gardening spaces and increase access to fresh produce.

Community Context

The majority of CAPIs clients are concentrated in Near North, North Minneapolis, Phillips/Powderhorn, and Brooklyn Center. The Minneapolis-St. Paul area has been a significant destination for the Hmong diaspora since the 1970s, with almost 25% of the Hmong population in the U.S. living in Minnesota³. According to the 2010 census, there are 7,512 Hmong Minnesotans currently residing in Minneapolis, and the St. Paul population is currently at 29,662⁴. While the initial home of most Hmong immigrants to the Twin Cities is within the urban core, after years spent in the U.S., many families choose to move to suburban communities. Recently, the Hmong population in Brooklyn Park and Brooklyn Center, suburbs north of Minneapolis, has grown dramatically, with the 2010 Census putting the Brooklyn Park Hmong population at 5,151, and the Brooklyn Center population at 3,170⁵.

The Northside Healthy Eating Project: Comprehensive Food Assessment (CFA) is a study conducted by BlueCross BlueShield of Minnesota in conjunction with the NorthPoint Health and Wellness Center. The survey, which was conducted in 2009, examined the

³Minnesota Historical Society, *Hmong*
<http://education.mnhs.org/immigration/node/576>

⁴Hmong National Development, *2010 Census Hmong Populations of Minnesota Cities*.
<http://www.hndinc.org/page17655759.aspx>

⁵Ibid.



perceptions and experiences of North Minneapolis residents, to determine the needs for and barriers to accessing fresh produce. Although the number of respondents to the CFA who identified as Asian was significantly below the percentage reported by the Census (1% versus 12%)⁶, the survey's findings reiterate, and add to, many of the points made by CAPI focus group participants. While the CFA reports that 22% of North Minneapolis residents lack access to a car⁷, that number is likely to be significantly higher among the Hmong population, due to financial constraints, recent arrivals in the U.S., and linguistic and cultural

barriers. According to the survey, most North Minneapolis residents shop for vegetables and fruit once a week or more often, while participants in our focus group indicated that shopping for vegetables was undertaken less frequently (around once a month). This is consistent with, and tied to, the issue of transportation. The CFA also found that lack of produce availability and lack of transportation were the two largest factors in residents' decisions to purchase vegetables and fruit⁸, which was consistent with the answers given to our focus group questions.

Conclusion

In general, participants were unable to access as much fresh produce as they would like, and while gardening helped to reduce the cost of accessing fresh vegetables and fruit, clients were unable to garden as much as they would have liked, due to the lack of gardening space. In terms of buying produce, transportation and finances were the biggest issues, and participants were deeply affected by the lack of fresh, affordable, culturally appropriate produce in their neighborhoods. Participants were interested in increasing local gardening space; while language barriers may prevent many of our clients from directly asking for gardening spaces, clients may be in the best position to identify appropriate gardening spaces in their neighborhoods. One approach that may further CAPI's mission while responding to our clients needs is to have clients identify spaces in their neighborhoods that are appropriate and convenient garden sites, and then have CAPI act as a go-between to speak with the landlords of those sites and secure land on behalf of our clients. This focus group demonstrates the persistence of the barriers that prevent CAPI's clients from accessing fresh produce; however, it also shows the enthusiasm for access to healthier and more equitable food systems. Ultimately, this focus group points out the need for gardening spaces, as an answer to the financial and geographical barriers faced by Minnesota's immigrant and refugee populations.

⁶NorthPoint Health and Wellness Center, Inc., *Northside Healthy Eating Project: Comprehensive Food Assessment*, 9

⁷Ibid., 15

⁸Ibid., 17



Works Cited

CAPI. *2012 1st Quarter Report*, http://www.capiusa.org/resources/1/Reports/CAPI1st_Quarter_Report_2012.pdf, (2012).

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