

## ***Food Insecurity in Union County***

### **Abstract**

*Despite Union County's agrarian heritage, a significant portion of its citizens face food insecurity. Many food insecure residents struggle to simply get to places where food is available whether it is a grocery store or a donation center. Some people, particularly children, do not want or are not in a position to try foods different from traditional fare. Educating on proper food handling and nutrition poses its own challenges in reaching distant and open minds. Geography and culture are sometimes barriers in finding solutions to this crisis, but education and outreach can limit and resolve them.*

### **Introduction**

Union County is a rural county in north central Florida that boasts three municipalities: the towns of Raiford and Worthington Springs and the city of Lake Butler, the county seat. Hallmarks of their agrarian heritage include vast distances between neighboring towns and close-knit communities. Nonetheless, some of Union County's physical and social characteristics are contributing to its food insecurity dilemma. The United Way of North Central Florida reports that around 18.9% of residents are food insecure. What is more alarming is the United Way of North Central Florida also states that about 26.7% of children in Union County are food insecure. The major issues facing Union County that contribute to this situation are a lack of food availability, behaviors and attitudes on food, and difficulties in reaching out to educate citizens.

### **Critical Issue No. 1 – Food Availability**

The biggest issue contributing to food insecurity in Union County is having nutritious food readily available. The only grocery store in the county is Spires IGA Market located in Lake Butler. While Lake Butler is located relatively in the center of Union County, it is still several miles away from Raiford and Worthington Springs. For people in these towns and in other parts of unincorporated Union County, getting to the

grocery store in Lake Butler may not be feasible if they do not own or are unable to drive a vehicle. Thus, many citizens rely on gas stations and other stores such as Dollar General within walking distance to their homes for their food supply. These stores have a very limited food selection with the majority of food choices being highly processed and containing excessive amounts of unhealthy fats, sugars, and salt. Fresh produce selection is often extremely limited if even in stock at all. Furthermore, fresh foods at these locations may cost much more than if they were purchased at Spires discouraging customers from purchasing them in lieu of cheaper, less nutritious items (Deary 2015). A decline in personal and community gardens is also affecting the amount of fresh produce available for those unable to reach the grocery store. Not to mention, those with disabilities may experience difficulty in managing a garden without specific instruction and aid. There are some food giveaways in Lake Butler and Lake City from various charities and food banks but accessing these donations still requires modes of transportation – something that many facing food insecurity do not have in the first place.

### **Critical Issue No. 2 – Behaviors & Attitudes**

What contributes to Union County's food insecurity predicament almost as much as not having adequate access to nutritious food are resident behaviors and attitudes towards food. While food variety in Union County has increased since the Spires IGA Market opened its doors four generations ago, the selection is still limited and people's appetites have remained fairly the same (Whitehead 2015). There have even been instances where children would rather go hungry than eat wheat bread\* (Whitehead 2015).

\*This statement is not scientific and it is based on what adults see students do with their food at school. Schools are required to offer whole grain and whole wheat bread in the National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs.

Children's reluctance to eat some foods can be attributable to numerous factors such as natural taste preferences, parent eating habits, and whether or not children are forced to eat certain foods (UCSF Benioff Children's Hospital). While children will not like everything that is offered to them, parents play a major role in controlling what their children eat or do not eat by choosing what foods they bring into the home and displaying their own eating habits and what they are willing or unwilling to try. Additionally, children's peers can contribute to their eating habits. Often, eating less nutritious foods such as pizza and French fries is considered more "cool" by one's classmates than eating an apple or some carrot sticks.

### **Critical Issue No. 3 - Education**

Another major problem preventing Union County from resolving food insecurity is lack of knowledge on proper food use, storage, and nutrition from residents. Many rely on information passed down from previous generations on how to prepare and store their food. Yet, sometimes these methods can be erroneous and potentially dangerous resulting in illness and even death, particularly from Botulism associated with canning (Center for Disease Control and Prevention 2013). However, educating citizens can be a very difficult task. Some residents are hesitant to listen to those who are "outsiders" from other parts of Florida and the world (Deary 2015). Moreover, reaching out and advertising an educational session being held is a challenge. Various methods of marketing must be used to reach the most people such as advertisement in the local newspaper, stores, churches, and county buildings along with via phone and the Internet. Lastly, there is the issue of educating those who are unable to make it to these educational sessions due to lack of transportation or physical disability.

## **Barriers**

The major barriers in addressing Union County's critical food insecurity issues are cross-county transportation and preconceived ideas on food. Without vehicle transport, many people cannot access the grocery store or reach other sources of food distribution. This situation is exasperated by the county's lack of public transport services such as bus routes (Deary 2015). Additionally, accepted beliefs and attitudes on food enforce traditional, at times unhealthy, eating and food handling habits and sometimes prevent new cuisine and techniques from being tried at all.

## **Solutions**

Despite these barriers, Union County is addressing its critical food insecurity issues through reaching out to the community and educating them. IFAS, the Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences at the University of Florida, has an extension office in Union County which has several initiatives in place to resolve food insecurity. One of these initiatives is the Family Nutrition Program in which people are exposed to new, healthier foods and recipes than what they are accustomed to (Deary 2015). Another part of this program is YUM, Youth Understanding MyPlate, which focuses on instructing elementary school children on how to eat using the MyPlate concept. Children are taught to identify what foods are whole grains, fruits and vegetables, and proteins and learn about food safety. Many children are responding to the program and are becoming aware of the nutritional impact of their foods (Duncan 2015). IFAS is encouraging personal gardens using traditional in-ground and new, innovative techniques such as hydroponics and raised beds (Deary 2015). Some of these new gardening methods allow for those with disabilities to engage in solving their own food

insecurity. IFAS also provides informational workshops on how to manage these gardens and how to properly prepare and preserve the produce grown. In addition, IFAS is attempting to coordinate with local gas stations and Dollar Generals to supply frozen produce for sale. Besides IFAS, there are services provided by Meals on Wheels and the Suwannee River Economic Council to distribute and supply food to elderly citizens who are facing food insecurity.

### **Concluding Paragraph**

Resolving food insecurity is of utmost importance for Union County officials working with this issue. Food insecurity is not just affecting their constituents; it is affecting their neighbors, friends, and families as well. Making nutritious food easily accessible for all residents and educating and changing their perceptions on food are not simple or easy tasks. While the rural landscape and culture can sometimes pose as barriers in achieving these goals, they also make Union County unique. For that reason, solutions which take into account Union County's way of life must continue to be utilized in order to eliminate food insecurity and provide a brighter future for its people.

## Bibliography

Betsy Whitehead, personal interview, March 19, 2015, Mrs. Whitehead's office, Lake Butler, FL.

Center for Disease Control and Prevention. 2013. "Home Canning and Botulism." July 22. <http://www.cdc.gov/features/HomeCanning/> (April 7, 2015).

David Duncan, personal interview, April 6, 2015, Bradford County IFAS Extension Office, Starke, FL.

Samara Deary, personal interview, April 6, 2015, Bradford County IFAS Extension Office, Starke, FL.

UCSF Benioff Children's Hospital. n.d. "Picky Eaters." n.d.

[http://www.ucsfbenioffchildrens.org/education/picky\\_eaters/](http://www.ucsfbenioffchildrens.org/education/picky_eaters/) (April 7, 2015).

United Way of North Central Florida. n.d. "Challenges Facing Our Community." n.d.

[https://www.unitedwayncfl.org/sites/uwncfl.oneeach.org/files/12Challenges%20Facing%20Our%20Community\\_0.pdf](https://www.unitedwayncfl.org/sites/uwncfl.oneeach.org/files/12Challenges%20Facing%20Our%20Community_0.pdf) (April 8, 2015).